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THE POTENTIAL

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**THE BEQUEST OF
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FRANCES FORBES-ROBERTSON, whose novel, "The Potentate," is being published in a new edition by J. F. Taylor & Co., is a sister of Forbes-Robertson the actor, whose success as Hamlet has placed him in the first rank on the English stage. A dramatization of "The Potentate" has been made by the author for her brother, and it is to be produced in London during the coming season. Negotiations have been begun to arrange for an American production of the play. Miss Forbes-Robertson's work is strong and full of dramatic fire. "The Potentate" will make a powerful play. It is a boldly sketched play of mediæval days in Italy; a vivid picture of the Court of Cosmo the Magnificent, Cosmo the Philosopher, Cosmo the Tyrant. The author of this curiously brilliant and strongly human novel of the Italian Renaissance is a woman of great artistic ability, and comes from a most talented family of actors, artists, and musicians. She is also a fencer of no mean skill, and uses her foils with the same deft power with which she handles her pen.

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THE POTENTATE

Harro, Mrs. Francis Maria of ...

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THE POTENTATE

A ROMANCE

BY

FRANCES FORBES-ROBERTSON

AUTHOR OF "ODD STORIES" "THE DEVIL'S
PRONOUN" ETC

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DEDICATION

THE CORNER HOUSE
CHELSEA

To you, my dearest Daisy, I dedicate
this book in remembrance of the old
days . . . and of those four dukes
who never came. . . .

Ever your devoted Sister,

FRANCKIE.

To
MISS FORBES-ROBERTSON
VILLA MONCEAU, PARIS

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Book I

EVERARD VAL DERNEMENT

CHAPTER I

VAGUE enough in history is this name—
Everard Val Dernement, yet across centuries the fragrance of the man's sweet life reaches us, and the story of his death, with his child-son's untimely knowledge of it, stand out among the countless tragedies that colour our chronicles of the Middle Ages.

It is said that when he was a stripling he had features chiselled as a young Greek's—eyes with a wistful look in them, and flaxen curls that fell about his shoulders like any pretty maid's. Indeed, we read that a burly merchant had been tempted on an occasion to call after him, "Thou resemblest a wench, and art nothing better." For the appraisement the good trader found himself biting Mother Earth in the gutter. "Thy mug only, methinks," he

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had added, at which the passers-by laughed, and gave a hand to raise him up. Thus we imagine the lad's body was ever correcting the evidence of his features to the routing of his enemies. Where the bully thought to find a likely prey for jesting at, he must, on the contrary, have discovered a veritable wight for the breaking of bones.

But withal it seems he was a dreamer, this pretty boy of iron frame, and possessed a heart like a woman's, so full was it of pity for all creatures that suffered, beasts or men, and desires for the bettering of others' condition. He would be at a coward with his sword—his eyes aflame, his jerkin awry, and his golden hair flying in the wind; then shoulder his man and bear him off to dress his wounds, and read him lengthy homilies that the cur liked no better than the sword thrusts, but perforce must hear from an inability to make a timely retreat. That the miscreants went little better than they came was no fault of the young enthusiast, if so it happened, but that of

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Nature, who, having cast her work in one mould, defies a change of shape till breaking time, when it is hoped things may reform themselves.

In Bresali shapes were mostly crooked. The hearts of men seemed awry, however fair were their outward bodies, for an evil man governed, and evil governing, as the wise know, maketh the governed evil. "The root of the matter is in the head," quoth a wag, and spoke something of the truth, which perhaps dawned on the minds of his listeners—made their fingers itch to be at that head. Indeed, we read of one among them remarking, "They grow too thick; at the falling of one up sprouts another, and who is to know it would not be even an uglier one?" In truth, the Duchy of Bresali was wholly ill-governed by one Cosmo of numerous titles, Count of this, and Lord of that, and at last Duke of Bresali. His enemies declared that he had usurped the throne, lawfully the heritage of the Count Alberto, whilst he (the Count) was detained a

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prisoner in the East. How much of truth there was in this statement, history has been unable to certify. Undoubtedly the Count Alberto had a party who were enthusiastically attached to his person, and who, against his wishes, were constantly plotting to reinstate him. He himself denied the claims, and only when hearing of the cruel outrages committed by his cousin on the people, was he pushed to admitting that the fall of the tyrant would surely come at last—and happily for the State.

For indeed Cosmo reigned with the despotic power of a petty king; he discarded every right and privilege of the people, and maltreated them at his pleasure. The peasants and townsfolk bore their suffering with a philosophical indifference notable among all animals sufficiently thrashed to submission. Things were thus and thus, and must be borne; for generations they had been so. The wise man should learn to combine the management of his affairs with a little cunning, and be ready

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to strike a blow when none was looking. Born into servitude, it seemed that such disposition was the eternal order of things; and if a more kindly governor occasionally fell to their lot, the routine of evil administration had become so customary, and official underlings so anxious to maintain a tyrannous policy, that the change could hardly have been felt by the oppressed people.

This Everard Val Dernement, of noble descent, something of a philosopher, yet mostly renowned for kindly deeds and his great heart, a lover, too, of the poor, must have been strangely out of place in such a century—in a way hardly conceivable to us who have absorbed into our every-day life moral theories then only thundered from pulpit, or gathered from the lips of philosophers. The very giving of alms was mainly done in atonement for committed sins—a virtue to be practised—a monster form, too, of patronage. Sins were numerous; the wily poor, therefore, thrived—precariously perhaps, and by the Devil's aid—

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but the disinterested bettering of the lives of the lowly would have been deemed a crack-brained heresy. Val Dernement, gifted with sensibilities abnormal in his day, sickened at the thought of this impotent helping, and in doing charity forgot to play the saint or sinner—necessary assumptions for the business to the mediæval mind. Yet in his intense individuality he was typical enough of that great age when genius dominated the world ; when man's capacity in any given line was "sampled," as it were, for all posterity.

He eventually came under the displeasure of the potentate, having, on an occasion, unwisely sided with a humble man in an affair against the ducal authority. The irate Cosmo, stunned to find a gentleman demeaning himself by a weakness for common swine,—for the matter had come to his ear, and more besides, which events went to prove was but calumny filtered to him through the mouth of a courtly scoundrel given to such meddlings,—swore to have his life ; and in time, with the help of this

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same meddler, accused him of treason towards his own person, and, after some ado, decorated the city gate with his head. "An example," quoth he, "to gentlemen who must needs step down into the mud to fight the battles of common cattle."

It happened that on the afternoon of that day, the murdered man's little son, a fair-haired, wistful creature, was gambolling through the outer streets of the city, vastly enjoying his independence in the company of a good friar, and, as is the way with boys, laughing riotously at every sight that met his young eyes, and blustering out every thought that passed through his whimsical little head.

"I would not be a monk," said he, "and wear petticoats like a wench"; then hugged his companion's arm for the slight suggested, and hurried him apace to stand stock still a minute after, and stare at a company of young nobles clattering down the street on horseback, their beasts bedecked with jewelled saddle-cloths and gilded trappings; or to peer up at the

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blue heavens between the high roofs, all unconscious of the awful sight ahead of him.

"'Tis good—'tis good to be out. Dost not find it so, brother Hypolite? I love the city, and now we must go home. Think you we shall come again soon, quite soon?"

"Hast thou not had enough?" answered the monk.

"Not nearly."

"Thou canst not have a holiday every day."

"Aye, I would."

"Thou wouldst grow tired."

"Nay; but thou dost not care for life," he said, and dressed his little person into a swagger.

"Not over much, little son; it seems all bright enough to thee, but——" The old man hesitated, and Everard answered,—

"I will no 'buts'; it *is* bright," and he gambolled on again before his companion. As they crossed an open space, the folk loitering about the great gate caught the lad's attention, and brought him up in hot haste to see

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what mischief was afloat ; on following the gaze of those at hand, he beheld the bleeding, dripping heads staring with glassy eyes.

“Look, look !” he cried in dismay, “there are heads upon the ramparts. Let us not go by. Ah, ah ! Away, away ! There is one that has a look of my father ! I cannot bear the sight of it !” And he hid his fair face in the friar’s sleeve. And the friar trembled, for he saw it was indeed Everard Val Dernement, pitiful and benign his face even in so vile a death. The unhappy monk could not move from the spot in sudden horror of the situation, and the loiterers that stood about gazed, too, up at the ghastly head, and muttered against the tyrant.

“Come,” at last murmured the friar ; but the little fellow had changed his mind, and, peeping again, could not take his eyes from oft the face that bore so strange a resemblance to his father ; yet it was paler, and darker too, his hair streaming almost black.

“Why did they cut off his head ?” he asked.

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The friar was silent, whilst a ragged man near snarled,—

“ Because he was a saint ” ; and another said, “ He loved the poor ” ; and another, “ Because he was brave.”

But the boy cried, “ These are no reasons at all, ye knaves ! ” so that the crowd laughed at the little mannikin’s choler. Then it happened that one, who had ridden up on a horse, bared his head and murmured, “ The deeds of Everard Val Dernement shall live, though a coward hath taken his life.” Whereat those about him looked frightened, and were for hurrying away, for the man had spoken treason. Curiosity, however, got the better of their prudence : the little boy had sprung to the horse’s side, and they lingered to see the outcome of so strange a scene.

“ Sir ! sir ! ” he cried, “ whose is this head hanging thus vilely, whom they all so praise ? Tell me, ’tis some villain, is it not ? ”

The man answered quietly, “ ’Tis the Count Everard Val Dernement.”

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"Thou liest!" shrieked the child. "The Count Everard Val Dernement is my father, and they could not—they dare not—and he is good, and—no, they would not thus treat my father. Nay, sir, you see, 'tis foolish; he is indeed like my father, but my father lives. He hath gone to visit our noble Duke. He will be home soon. He told me so ere he went. There were tears in his eyes, for it was cold, he said, though 'twas not cold at all. See, see, his hair was not so dark. And why look ye all so strange? Tell me, some of ye—tell me, good friar, he is mistaken."

Then, as none spoke, and the man on horse-back dropped his head upon his breast, and one murmured, "Take him away"; and another, "By the saints! 'tis dastardly to leave a babe to stare at his own father's swinging head," he cried,—

"Nay, I will not away!" and a wild look crept into his eyes, and the child hands impotently beat the air. "I will to the Duke, to the Duke! he will give me back my father!"

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"Go not to the cursed murderer, lest he kill thee too," said a woman.

"Kill me too! Ah! mistress, will you not tell them all this is not my father?"

"It is thy father," quoth a paltry creature in the crowd, agog to tell the news. Whereat a murmur of indignation rose among the lookers-on, which died in a sudden hush. The boy for one moment stood erect, with wide-open eyes and blanched face, then fell to the ground, a little heap, his hair streaming in the mud, and above him the dead eyes of his father, staring into futurity from out the sad, white face of the mutilated head.

CHAPTER II

THE strange rider, a gentleman evidently of noble birth, remained some seconds, dazed at the shocking occurrence. Then he stooped from his horse, and motioned with an angry gesture to the bewildered monk to lift the boy to his saddle. The crowd opened to let the horseman and his burden through, and a stout tradesman in it pushed his way to the front to get a better view of the audacious stranger who had dared to defy the tyrant in the public streets, and openly bear off the son of the dishonoured Val Dernement. "By the saints! 'tis the Count Alberto," he murmured under his breath, and turned pale, then hastened away, lest he should be caught in treasonable company. And indeed the square was hardly emptied than the cortege of the Duke appeared at the lower end of the narrow

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street. The nobles and gentlemen approached leisurely, talking and laughing the while, toying with the bejewelled reins, and twisting in their saddles to speak with a comrade behind, or better to view a street sight. On passing the hideous gate, a casual glance from them denoted that they were hardly aware of any unusual atrocity at hand. Only the young Duke, seated in a great gilded carriage with unglazed windows, and drawn by four horses fantastically mantled in crimson caparisons, turned his eyes deliberately to the ramparts with a momentary smile of triumph. His pallid face, artificially whitened, under the straight, straw-coloured hair hanging lank on either side, and scarlet lips, suggested the mask of a painted effigy animated to sudden life for some malevolent purpose.

When the cavalcade, a stream of changing colour, had passed, the people about dispersed ; only a few beggars remained loitering near the ghastly gate, as if there were something here in sympathy with their own condition.

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The dead were comrades they had no reason to shun. These mendicants were used to ghastly enough faces among the living ; more awful, perhaps,—beings dying alive, as it were, the flesh rotting on the bones, whilst imminent death was still unthought of ; hidden lepers, sometimes, or maimed creatures with mutilated bodies, who were glad of this for the revenue it brought, and were cleverly enough mimicked on occasions by hardier folk. To such daily sights actual death could bring no more gruesome addition. On the contrary, a certain peace and hallowedness came with it—the friendly intruder, to the over-suffering.

Yet in the Middle Ages the beggar had his reign of greatness, his day of uncontested right to be—and to be himself, and nothing better nor worse. The dignity of a position was his ; not very high salaried, it is true, but a staple one, if varying daily in its remuneration. Respect was paid to his person, the medium through which the sins of the wealthy might be washed out,—and they sinned well, the

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wealthy. To clothe the naked and give in charity were commandments of the Church, without the keeping of which no pardon could be obtained ; at least, theoretically. Beggars therefore were in demand. These street philosophers, who laughed at the laws, civil or religious, defied creeds, and, with their tongue in their cheek, watched the world play its game of civilizing, with a ready grin for its woeful strategems—who lived their vagrant lives under the heavens, assuming, according to their humour, the cloak of any sect or party, masquerading with most convincing zeal, sometimes for nearly a lifetime, but always with a wink at last—pagans never really converted, too sacred in their calling to attack, too vile to punish, were perhaps the freest souls in town or province. Their actual lives were seemingly charmed at a time when life was little valued, and when an ordinary man, for thieving, was hanged, or a pious merchant put to torture for no greater sin than heresy.

One of these ragged creatures, after the

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passing of the Duke, hobbled out into the open from the shadow of an arch, like a morsel of the grey masonry quickened to crawling life, and, standing just where the wheels of the tyrant's carriage had rolled, spat upon the ground and said,—

“The rotting bowels of him aloft are worth more than thou and thy immortal soul and the whole crew of thy dandies and harlots, thou painted faced hell cat in a man's body!” And a blue-jerkined butcher near, roared with laughter at the vehemence of the beggar. “Thou deservest, by all that's holy, better reward than thou'rt ever likely to get, for such an eloquent tongue. See here, I will spit with thee, good friend—that for Cosmo, our noble Duke!” and he spat upon the ground with a comical look of contempt on his ruddy countenance.

The stranger, meanwhile, drew rein at a lowly apothecary's, and shouted to those within. An aged man, in a long gown with a fur collar, hastened out, and, after a glance at

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the boy, administered a cordial that quickly brought life back to the inanimate little body. Then the rider threw a silver piece, and spurred on his horse again, making straight out of the city by the western gate, along the white road that intersected the plains in an endless serpentine line, rising and dipping with the low undulations. They passed the great monastery, on the brow of a low hill, with its outlying houses and chapels and farm buildings. The same where the little fellow passed most of his time with the good monks, who taught him to tend the fruit trees with themselves in the high-walled garden, making him construe a Latin verse the while. From thence he had evidently wandered on this day, wild with spirits at the thought of paying a visit to the city, looking back again and again to wave a hand to the old prior who watched the two depart. Now, he was not aware even that they were passing the well-loved old place. The monotonous movement of the steady canter lulled the child to sleep,

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and only at last, when they had reached the Manor with its fort-like walls, and low, arched gateways, and towers, did he wake to full consciousness. He clutched the hand convulsively that helped him to the ground, and then stood trembling from head to foot.

"Take my lord at once to the Countess," said the stranger, and turning about he rode out of the court.

The servants stood irresolute, gaping for the moment after the departing horseman, then looking pitifully at the lad, with the expression that he had seen in the eyes of the poor folk about the great gate. Their demeanour towards him was more respectful than usual—he had sported with them often enough—so that, on the threshold of his home, the boy noticed an appreciable change. The atmosphere seemed laden with the weight of a pause: the hush, surely, after something awful that had passed. Their white faces frightened him, their new attitude of respect, like the mock courtesy of phantoms in a nightmare,

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was intolerable, detestable. He ran past them swiftly into the house and up the wide stairway. Did his mother know then? Did she know that they had slain his father—they had slain his father—unless it were a terrible mistake? His little feet went the swifter at the thought. His mother would tell him it was not true; but, perhaps, she did not know. Then it would be for him to tell her, and the excitement and importance of bearing the terrible news nerved him to his task. At the entrance to the Countess's apartments there was a frightened-looking page who opened the door quietly, and announced, "My lord, the Count Everard Val Dernement."

Everard started. His father, then, was here on his footsteps. He looked over his shoulder with a scared face, as if expecting to see the dangling head; but no one was there. The ladies-in-waiting made reverences as he passed, they too wore that look of infinite pity, and he suddenly understood. His father would never cross the threshold again. He himself

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was my lord, the Count Everard Val Derne-ment. He crossed the apartment like one in a dream. The Lady Eldis moved aside a heavy curtain, and motioned to him to pass through. He went in, and stood still in the centre of the darkened room. A woman's figure, entirely clad in white, rose from the ground and faced him. "My son!" she said, but the boy dared not move. The sight of that face so full of awful anguish, the tear-streaming eyes, red-rimmed and surrounded by deep black shadows that melted in the pallor of her cheeks, paralysed his will. Everard had never seen a grown person weeping. Tears, to him, had meant a childish weapon against insisted authority : a weakness to be ashamed of, to be put away in all haste, humiliating withal, pertaining to childhood in disgrace. A grown person weeping, that was awful ! He dared not approach. The revelation of a sorrowing world, hitherto unknown to him, broke upon the boy. Something separate from himself—that he was too young

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to take part in—and terrifying. Would those eyes before him weep for ever? He remembered that the good friar Hypolite had narrated to him how that St. Peter had wept till two furrows marked his face where the tears had fallen, and the thing had seemed strange to him and unreal; and now he understood. Would not she, too, have those marks of tears shed, and he could do nothing. Might he not creep away into a dark corner, and cry his own childish tears of loneliness and pity for those who were sorrowing. That he too was feeling this great pain that had brought that look into his mother's face, did not occur to him. He should weep because others suffered, and they had slain his father, and he was alone, very much alone and frightened. The mystery of this woman's sorrow was infinite, something he could not reach, and associated with it was that dangling head on the ramparts that they had told him was his father.

“Everard, my boy, will you not come to me?”

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He stirred, and, as she stretched out a hand, rushed forward, and putting his arms about her, held her tightly, as if actually to protect her from a tangible force that should be overwhelming. His little face was quite white, his dry eyes wide open, and his mouth set. He quivered with the intensity of his purpose, and, when she broke down, terribly weeping, he stroked her, and pressed her hand to his little person with masterful energy, passionately determined to console. And tears, less bitter, less desolate, fell hot on those others. "My little son!" she murmured between the great sobs that would come, "my little son!"

CHAPTER III

IN the desolate house the widowed mother remained unmolested by the tyrant. Living as a recluse, there could hardly be found reason for disturbing her, and the tender years of the little Everard preserved him from any unwonted suspicion or calumnies. Moreover, the murder of Val Dernement had caused a burst of ill-feeling from the people that the Duke could not safely ignore. Further interference with the unhappy family of his victim might cost too dear a price. A riot had been imminent, and the suppressed hootings of the crowd in the streets on the morrow of the execution had had an ugly sound, sufficiently smothered to suggest a possible uproar at last—a maddened rabble dragging him from his horse before his guards could interfere. These people, who had silently, even callously, suffered

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generations of oppression, who had been taxed to starvation, had seen their companions hanged for an insolent word to a tyrant's favourite, their women outraged, and their children dying from want, and yet had hardly murmured, would, at the unjust killing of one less cruel a taskmaster than the others, rise in a frenzy of rage, and assail a fortress, if must be, with no better weapons than tooth and nail. The hissing had become exaggerated in the Duke's ears, and the soul of the potentate shrank with the terror he could never successfully conquer—the uncontrollable, unspeakable terror of death. That characteristic lust for the blood of his enemies, the passion to see their hearts torn from their bodies still fluttering with movement of life, was somehow an accompaniment of this emotion: a revenge upon those who would have had his life, who had tortured him with this fear of death. To strew the ways with the blood of others should save the spilling of his own. If he could but kill enough he would be safe from the assassin

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at last. Yet on his face—on the white-plastered face—this same crowd had only seen the mocking smile of the tyrant. His scarlet lips showed no tremor, and his heavy eyelids only drooped with the tired look of a bored young noble who found the rabble unsavoury and pre-eminently foolish. Listlessly he rode by, till his very nonchalance cowed them to submission.

Though the greater part of Val Dernement's estate was confiscated, the fortified Manor and considerable lands about it were left as patrimony for the young heir, "by the gracious clemency of Cosmo, Duke of Bresali, etc." The boy was too young to realize how much had been taken from him. There was only one great absence, one great void, that it seemed to him impossible ever to get quite used to. The longing for the lost parent became intensified with the passing of each day. He would wander about through the passages and halls, a desolate little child, seeking distraction in the great empty rooms and unused corridors, avoid-

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ing the intimate places where they had sported together, and yet, now and then, going thither on tip-toe, to torment his little heart with feelings of the warm presence hardly gone, though a new and frightening atmosphere was there too. Then, on a sudden, he would pretend to himself that he heard the clatter of horses hoofs in the court without, the sound of his father's voice, and would race along the corridor and down the wide stairs—a little flaxen-haired figure, flying in hot haste to the encounter of an imaginary parent. Over and over again he would enact this fictitious meeting of himself and the beloved one, who, as he argued, had not, after all, been slain. It had been a mistake ; another like him—so very like him—had suffered in his stead ; here he was with them again. They must both go to my lady's apartments ! And he would hurry thither, only at the door turning away with a little sigh half suppressed, and a wistful look in his eyes for ever ending the childish play before it was finished.

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The good friars would at times beguile him away from the saddened house to the monastery on the hill, where he made the acquaintance of Stevio Calmani, a little fellow of his own age, with dark hair and great brown eyes, wistful and soft when not ablaze with sudden passions. He seemed to Everard to know countless wonderful things—to be a person of great importance. His merriment was overwhelming, his sudden seriousness as solemn and convincing as an old man's, and more mysterious. They became sworn friends, rambled about the old monastery together, and learnt their lessons from one book. Thus the monks made him forget his childish pain for brief intervals, and at his departure sent him home laden with sweet fruits from the high-walled garden to tempt the appetite of the sick Countess, who was growing daily more frail, and whose white face and great hollow eyes awed the boy into a timid reserve that created a barrier between them at last. The visits to those darkened apartments became oppressive

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and frightening. He would catch his breath on entering, and not know what to say when within. He thought of suggesting that great game of pretence,—if they might only pretend together,—but he could never summon courage enough to suggest it. The idea seemed different, indeed impossible, when he thought of it there in the silent chamber. Outside again, he would draw a breath of relief.

Yet for the sake of the boy, the unhappy woman clung to life with a pathetic tenacity that would yield nothing to the weakness of the flesh.

“I must live,” she explained to her physician, “till my boy is old enough to understand the message I have to leave him ; then I will die in peace, *Deo volente*, my good doctor.”

And the physician would glance furtively at the thin white hands so little corporeal now, translucent as wax, and at the emaciated figure under the numerous white robes, and calculate the possible time that frail body could live without a miracle.

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It came at last, the end, two years later, when Everard was a tall boy, though still with a child's face. He had been wakened in the middle of the night by a hand on his shoulder, and had started up, wide eyed, with a prescient sense, already, of coming calamity.

Standing there, shading the light with her hand, was Eldis, one of his mother's ladies-in-waiting, telling him to rise quickly and come with her. "The house is all asleep, but she calls for you, quick!" He stumbled into his clothes, boyishly shy of his nakedness before her, yet aware of the little importance of anything but haste. He could not get into his shoes, and she stooped to help him. Then the two went down the dark staircase, and through the long corridors, which at other times would have frightened the boy. He found himself, in spite of all the sincere anxiety that possessed him, noticing trivial details. The little gold net that held the Lady Eldis' dark locks—it had slipped somewhat down, and the loose curl strayed over her neck—such a white neck!

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He wondered if the Lady Eldis slept in the golden net, and did all the ladies wear such long night-gowns. She had thrust a great green cloak, bordered with ermine over her, and it, with her night-dress, trailed on the stairs. The candle threw a queer, uncertain light that sent the shadows moving about them.

Then they reached the curtained door, and Everard felt his heart rise. His mother was dying then, and he had come to say good-bye. A sudden flood of light emanating from the stairs, and the even tramp of many feet, made the two draw back and fall on their knees, as the Prior, bearing the Holy Sacrament, and several monks carrying lights, approached and entered before them.

"We must wait a little," said the Lady Eldis, and she clasped his hand that was cold and trembling in hers. They listened to the low murmuring within, "*Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.*"

"*Miserere nobis,*" repeated the Lady Eldis, beating her breast with her hand.

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"Let us go in," said the boy convulsively.

"Not yet."

Then the sounds ceased, and there was a silence.

"I will go now," he said, but she held him still. The monks with the lights passed out again. The Prior had remained.

"Now we will go," said she; then he was afraid for the moment, and clung to her. The Prior came for the boy. She pushed him forward. Still he clung.

"Courage!" she whispered.

"Come," said the monk gently. The young Everard looked up, then rushed suddenly before him. The tears were brimming over his eyes, and pouring down his cheeks, so that he could hardly see. A stifled cry broke from his lips as he entered the inner room, ablaze now with lights. He stumbled to the low white bed with its green and gold canopy aloft.

"Thou shalt not die! God will not let thee die!" he cried.

A smile broke over the white face of the

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dying woman—that smile he had so longed for—and she held him to her breast.

“Hush! hush! dearest boy. Do not cry. Thou wilt break thy mother’s heart afresh, if thou dost cry so. Listen, my boy, my dear little son; thou art old now, thou’lt soon be a man, and then, then——” She held him closer to her; “thou wilt avenge thy father.” She wore no cruel look of anticipation, only one of simple assurance, that, having spoken the words the deed would be accomplished. Again the smile illumined the wasted face. The thin hand clutched the boy a little tighter; she sighed, and then drooped her head as one who had fallen asleep. They drew the clinging boy away.

“My mother! my mother!” he cried desperately; “not yet, thy boy wants thee so!”

CHAPTER IV

THOSE first years of bereavement, spent mostly with the good monks, were gloomy and sad enough for the young heir. Not till the recovery from a lingering fever, which fortunately took with it the keener remembrance of those terrible months, throwing events into a happy past that needed an effort on his part to recall vividly, did something of a natural youthfulness and gaiety return to the boy. Later, he left the monastery, and, with Stevio Calmani and other youths of his age, resided at Bresali, procuring special instruction for the learning of such courtly accomplishments and feats of arms as were suitable to his position, and that he could hardly acquire with the good brothers. He travelled, too, paying a visit to the Count of M—— in his impregnable fort in the hills, and

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another to a distant kinsman in the south. Both journeys afforded inexpressible delight to the boy, who, riding, accompanied only by a squire, through the loveliest country in the world, experienced that first sense of adventure and of freedom so dear to vigorous youth. The new places stirred his imagination, in their unexpected beauty, to sudden ecstasies of appreciation that would keep him lagging on a hillside till his companion would testily ask if it were a vision of saints he saw, that he remained thus gazing like a sentimental maid.

Those windings up a steep path to a town hanging over the very edge of precipitous rocks—blackish walls, with a tower at every corner, encompassing the red roofed houses rising one upon another, all in a delightful heap about the central stronghold, a tiny castle of a petty Signor, perhaps, with an emblazoned standard aloft waving in a light wind; the mountain pedestal sloping gradually at the base into the stretches of vineyards and corn grown plains, a line of blue water winding

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serpent-wise in its midst. Or the coming suddenly on a township in a hollow, bathed in the mystery of an early morning light, its faintly roseate dwelling-places and farms and monastery spread out in the lap of the valley, with no protecting walls but the hills. And the riding into the great cities with their narrow, crowded streets, their huge palaces and wide, circular open spaces. The wondrous churches ablaze with coloured marbles and mosaics, the colonnaded academies and halls of justice ; and, above all, the streams of humanity, the shrill bargainings in the market-place, the sudden stampedes of noisy students, the glint of armour in the crowd, the gorgeous dresses of the nobles, and the many-coloured clothes, purple and green and scarlet, worn by the burghers,—all seemed wonderful enough to the young traveller.

He returned to Bresali, still only a boy, and quite unsoiled by contact with a new world. Was it that his stay had not been long enough, or his own incorruptible purity that had kept

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him free from the baser life uppermost in the practices of his generation? Something of both these reasons, perhaps, and also because of that latent sense within him of the great tragedy that had passed in a vague long ago, that he was yet to avenge in a future almost as dim, yet his certain goal—a sobering enough influence on his spirits that at times would rise sufficiently high to frighten the boy into the consciousness of the intensity of his own powers for joy—the joy of life that was not for him.

At last he was on the threshold of his majority. Dernement was celebrating the occasion, and the old house was full of noisy visitors, whilst he was dreaming of going south to the wars, to join the Emperor in his campaign.

On the evening of that day he found himself, for a brief moment, alone in the great hall yet unilluminated; and he remained there, fascinated by the flicker of the fire into one of those reflective moods peculiar to him.

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The light from the embers caught at the gold in his tunic, and silhouetted his flaxen hair out from the shadowy surroundings. The rich dress he wore was disorderly, and his young face flushed with wine ; yet his eyes watched, almost wistfully, the flames lick the piled up logs, and a certain innocent expression of amusement came into them as he now and then glanced over his shoulder towards the door to an inner hall, whence shouts of noisy revellers reverberated through the Manor. He had stolen apart from his guests for a moment's respite from the long day of pleasure, and found himself reviewing the inconsequent past that had slipped to-day from him for ever, and looking a little askance at the face of the future—responsible manhood, which had welcomed him that morning with the poor gift of a poverty-stricken estate for his majority. With it had come his determination to depart, on the morrow, south to the wars—an idea of his caprice, to ride away at early dawn, whilst his friends should still be asleep, saying no

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good-bye to the home of his forbears, nor to the light heads, the exquisites and witty roysterers who had been his companions thus long. They had clamoured for a feast ; and a feast of three days he had given, such as only the fastidious taste of the striplings of his time could conceive more splendid. He had nigh emptied his pockets for their humour, and they, in return, had tried to tuck him abed with the first pretty wench they could lay hands on. The virgin-boy was man enough to be amused by their whims, and sufficiently quick-witted to cheat their most serious plannings to storm his very obdurate heart ; though he had been nigh caught, once, by a pair of shy brown eyes—those of a serving-maid, a pretty little person, they had thrust into his room. He was sitting in the recess of a great painted window at the time, reading a volume of written love-songs, and, in a sudden moment, he had kissed her, only to be possessed in the next by a sense of uncontrollable anger and shame, so that he set to his

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book again, as if she were not present, looking furtively now and then at her above his page. The poor child had cried from sheer loneliness. Then, at the sight of her tears, the whimsical soul had sprung to his feet. He strode about the room, blaming himself for a brute, apologising to her for the insult, as if she were a grand lady indeed, and did not want his kisses. He prayed her to forgive him. He had not meant it—'twas but one! whilst she cried afresh at the protestation, ashamed at the lacking of her own charms that could not make it two. And when she had gone poorly comforted, he set to wondering, and recalled that, at the first kiss, he had observed that her hands were red and coarse; and then he set to sighing, till a figure of a saint in the coloured window above him, dusky haired and crimson robed, seemed to live in his fancy as what a maid should be, and he reflected 'twould be a wondrous thing to woo a saint. This had been their only success, not a great one; and they, spying through the

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keyhole at the time, had twitted him since, even till now, enough for a hundred such mishaps. Thoughts of their monstrous antics upon others of his kind, to whom they were less merciful than to himself, kept the smile flickering across his face, when a movement in the hall brought his stray fancies to a hurried standstill.

"Coming, coming," he called, a little testily, without making any move to rouse himself till the figure of a middle-aged man, cloaked from head to foot, had stood some minutes by his side. He had entered from the remotest end of the hall, whence he had been so far escorted by a gorgeously bedecked page, not very steady upon his young legs, and a little vague as to the whereabouts of his master ; so that when Val Dernement looked up at last, he started on meeting the steady gaze from one who was certainly not of his guests. The youth instinctively clutched the dagger at his belt, only hesitating to draw as the strange eyes seemed to peer at him from across

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the long years of his life, paralysing his consciousness of the present, and dragging him back into a real and living past. The walls of the old mansion fell before his mental vision. He was in the streets now, a little boy, and round about him thronged the people, and above him were hideous dangling heads on the ramparts, and among them the beloved face of his father, besmeared with blood. Then a horseman rode into their midst, and shouted : "The deeds of Everard Val Dernement shall live, though ——" and he looked up at the horseman's face, and the eyes that looked down into his were those of the silent intruder before him now.

Had he come on this night of his majority to remind him that manhood brought other obligations than those of toasting his friends' mistresses in the red wine from the cellars, and the baffling of their endeavours to make a love-sick youth of him? Yet he had loved the boisterous fun of the long day, the sham tiltings without in the court, the games,

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the dressings up of some of them as devils and angels, and going in riotous procession through the little old town, frightening the good dames by climbing in at their windows, and their corpulent sires by filling them with drink they had little stomach for—a wager, perhaps, afloat, as to who should fill his man the fullest. They had stumbled, too, during the wild parade, on a funeral—collided with the torch-bearers at a corner, and for a brief moment were subdued by a superstitious sense of the ill omen of such an encounter. The *De Profundis*, murmured by the priest for the departed soul, rang ominous in the sudden silence, and the shadowy, cloaked figures, bearing a child's coffin, glided by the bedecked revellers between the flaring torches in the still daylight, like a phantom procession—at least, to the excited imagination of the youths who, afterwards, were not quite certain if they had seen a real thing or not, and grew even more delirious in their determination to tease and torture all the world into their own good

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humour. And now through all this, through the coloured, fantastic picture of the day's revels, through the hush of the funeral procession that recurred now to his mind with greater emphasis, over the long years of his boyhood, the face of his father in death stared down at him from the ramparts of the city gates.

The stranger had taken him home on that day ; later he had visited his mother. His mother had received him on her knees. "He was a great man," they had answered to his own childish questioning, and had not mentioned his name. Everard, remembering his mother's action, knelt now. "Welcome to Dernement," he said ceremoniously, then rose to his feet. "You have come to reproach me," he continued, "to tell me that I have forgotten *him*," and his eyes stole back to the fire. "Yes, to-day I had forgotten him ; every day, from my boyhood upwards, I have reminded myself that I am living to avenge him. The sight of his dead face has haunted me through

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all these years, and yet to-day I had forgotten him."

"The day is not over," answered his visitor.

"What more can I do to-day that I might not have done yesterday; what am I but a poor coward, vowing vengeance, yet waiting, and waiting, and waiting, for what?—the opportunity that will never come. . . . Building up my excuses into a great wall to separate me from it. . . . And yet, and yet, I have prayed to do this thing."

"You shall do it."

"Yes, yes," Val Dernement answered listlessly; "I shall do it." Then there was a little silence between them, till the boy said, with a wistful smile, "Well, Sir Stranger, what is your will of me, for your reproaches come slowly, and I must needs join my guests."

CHAPTER V

“**I** BRING you the opportunity to-night,” he answered quietly.

“To-night!” repeated Val Dernement, trying to catch his companion’s meaning: then noting a grave look on his face, he turned to him in a sudden passion.

“Speak, you have some plot for this—to-night, why, yes, to-night! My God, to-night! Only, for pity’s sake, tell me how! What other night more fitting than this!”

The stranger looked up; a smile that seemed to soften the hardness of his expression into something of sadness parted his lips. He put out his hands towards Everard with a little gesture of protective authority.

“Come, come!” he said, “I did not expect to find Val Dernement’s son like a choleric maid.” His cloak fell back with the gesture,

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revealing the gleam of armour beneath, and a jewelled chain about his breast, such as were only worn by nobles of certain rank.

“Do you know,” he went on, “how your father came by his death?”

“He was betrayed, maligned, calumniated to the Duke, by a traitor,” answered Everard.

“And you do not know who that traitor was?”

“No; I seek him.”

The elder man put both his hands on the boy's shoulder and looked oddly into his eyes, at first as if to impart to him some of his own implacable strength, and then as if the memory of another face came between them.

“How like you are,” he murmured, and again the strange smile illumined the austere countenance. “Listen; the crime of your father,” he said slowly, and Everard winced at the word, “was that of being too good. This grim world of ours only gives us such men now and again,—sparsely enough,—and they are always done to death. The day when

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they shall not be, then—well, that does not matter ; at any rate, through their short lives they sow seeds that others at least can cultivate, perhaps winning only death, too, for their pains. Yet the work goes on. It is only a question of how many shall die.” He turned away, and seemed to forget his companion and his purpose, in a deep thoughtfulness that touched matters of which the lad could have no knowledge.

Everard wondered if it was of his own death he was thinking, and questioned himself who he could be, this grave man, possessed of the demeanour of a potentate, and the strange power of forcing others to a bending of the knee to his humour, calling out something, even of love, in such short moments of intercourse.

“To-morrow morning,” the stranger continued, suddenly looking up, “to-morrow, or the latest, the day after, some five hot-headed youths are to be hanged. They, too, have been calumniated by this man. The Duke has

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not yet their names ; but before many hours their bodies will be his, and their heads decorating the ramparts of his castle."

"What can we do?" said Everard. The two looked at one another in a long silence, then the other continued :—

"Have you the courage to see this traitor to-night?"

"You know where he is?"

"We know. He will be alone, writing the names of these men and others on a parchment, in one of the great houses that has become his as reward for such services—so much land and chattels for so much flesh and blood. The tyrant's life, by such worms, is made safe. This parchment will reach the Duke to-morrow, unless——"

"Go on."

"Any one entering his room——"

"Well?" persisted the boy.

"He is old."

"But he betrays men for money."

"And women," said the stranger.

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"Not women?"

"His hair is white."

"Surely not women?" repeated Everard.

"And he is feeble."

"Surely not women?"

"Women; and he betrayed your father."

Everard turned pale, and clutched his dagger.

"I will kill him," he said. "I will surely kill him. You wish that, do you not. Let us go."

"There will be danger."

"I will risk it."

"It might be a question of your life or his."

"I am prepared to give my life if needs be, but I will take his first. Let us go now—now."

"He is old; it will be difficult to strike. He might be afraid. He might beg you for mercy, plead his age, assert his innocence, or implore your pity."

"He shall not see me strike."

"'Tis an awful thing to do; some would say cowardly."

"Let them say it."

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"Are you not afraid to strike an old man from behind?"

"Ah! why do you waste words? I will do this thing. I swear I will creep in like a thief. I will murder him, or I will fight him. I will do what you will." He knelt down on the ground before the fire and nervously thrust some new logs into the blaze. It had grown dark, and the hall was dark but for the light given from the flames. Their warmth warmed his body against the coldness that was chilling his blood.

"Gentlemen do not fight such cowards," answered the stranger. "Moreover, old as he is, he would kill thee in a moment. His foreign hands are twice as quick as ours, and wily as Satan's. You must get that parchment—the list of names. Risk nothing that may lose you that, and then kill him; and God, who made the vile thing, will find a fitting place for his soul. Do you hear? I will wait for you to-night at eleven by the eastern door."

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He stood for a moment looking down at the slight young figure stretched now on the ground ; then turned and crossed the hall towards the outer door.

The boy lay quite still. He listened to the departing of the strange visitor, who went as unceremoniously as he had come. The door banged, and a little gust of wind sped across the floor and buffeted his face : then there was a great silence, so that the throbbing of his own heart seemed audible, and the wild rush of his thoughts, too, to be noisy things dinning in his ears, sending the blood rioting through his veins, uniting the mental and physical man of him in one great pulsation. Vengeance at last, then ! The long desire of his boyish years had come on the night of his manhood. The feverish dreams of ever chasing, yet ever being eluded ; the thrusting of his blade through bodies that were, after all, but phantoms, should disturb his rest no more. The coward's face should no longer peer at him from the darkness,

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grinning, mocking, defiant, displaying the head of the beloved one, in a sudden vision, stuck on the rampart. His turn now to hiss and grin, before burying his blade in the serpent's heart. And yet, what troublesome feeling was this that shrank from the deed, that would steal away from these thoughts, and take him back to the childish days, when he first discovered the flowers nestling between the corn, and was afraid to touch them, lest in the plucking they should die, and yet found them so sweet that he must needs pluck at last, grieving so, as they gradually faded, the wondrous coloured things? Back again with the good friar Hypolite, strolling over the fragrant country, where, in the open, he would make the brother race and jump in undignified sprawlings, such as an old friar was hardly expected to do, and that set them both laughing till the tears rolled down their cheeks; then the long rests in the grassy places, the stories of saints, and fairies, and great kings

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that followed, all in a medley, to please the boy and instruct him betimes.

"Thou'rt like the man in the moon," he had once declared to the round-faced monk, as he peered up at him from the ground, where he was lying flat on his back, the good Hypolite being aloft on a hillock, his cowl set in the sky as it were; and the delightful answer had come in all solemnity, "'Tis a brother of mine," and thenceforward *brother in the moon* became their special pleasantry.

Thus his soul dragged him thither into the quiet past, away from violent action. Might he not stay? But there, too, the stream of blood suddenly crossed his path. His childhood had other memories than those of sweetness. Strolling with this same friar, the awakening had come, the consciousness of great and irremediable wrong, of hideous evil, of God having turned His face away indeed. The sight of crime in his very childhood, of the ignominious death of his father, had ousted the bubbling joy of life, all the

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natural tenderness, to plant the necessity of great hate and the passion for revenge. His heritage, then, was violence, not peace. Surely He who had sown that dear parental adoration was responsible for this grim offspring!

The boy rose, calmed by the realization that, whatever he would, his path lay but one way. He looked down the silent hall, suddenly conscious that this was his home—desolate, for all the revelling! There was no home for the child of the slain man still unavenged; nor could there be a return to it after this very night's deed, which deed oddly took form in his mind (such strange tricks will conscience play with the human understanding) as something, too, separate from his revenge—a crime on his part—a dastardly deed on an old, helpless man, for which he must render account. It must be done, but none the less must he take the responsibility. Thus were there two separate things inseparable. This avenging the dead, that was just; this killing, that was unjust.

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The returning evil for evil ever bringing a new evil, so that there was no wiping out—the sin of one man widening in circles, embracing unwilling souls, till hell were peopled with the victims.

The place had grown very silent as Val Dernement crossed to the door to join his guests. He hesitated there a moment, and looked back, wondering if the stranger had ever in truth crossed the threshold. Had he ever come? Was it not all a day-dream of his imagination? Had that other door ever shut on the departing figure?

CHAPTER VI

IN the great dining-hall, garlands of flowers hung from column to column ; and the varlets (footmen) in gold and white, with black, pointed shoes that turned up before them, hurried hither and thither, carrying dishes of game and venison, and flasks of wine. A peacock, like a living creature, with trailing tail and gilded beak, lay on its stomach in a golden dish, and sweetmeats in queer shapes loaded the narrow, tresselled table that crossed one end of the hall between the columns to which young trees were bound, their leaves dangerously near the flaring lights, and on the cloth fragrant herbs were strewn about.

High up on the west wall, directly in the corner, protruded a square gallery, which was crammed with musicians in blue tunics,

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who played on long brass trumpets at intervals. Many of the guests still wore their costumes of the masque ; so that, here and there among the motley crowd of superbly attired nobles, a horned creature, with black face and red body, placidly nibbled at his bone, or sent a quaint word bounding down the table, to be caught by a wag and tossed back in a new guise, to the delight of the less dextrous wits. The round-bellied butler, a pious soul in long, green gown bordered with a bristly fur, suggesting something of the character of the man, found it wrong, this sitting to board in such devilish clothes—enough to bring Satan himself in their midst, and bad fortune to the house, an ill-fated one already, through such wanton impiety ; and he bustled backward and forward between the long-legged varlets, pinching an obstreperous one's ear, and cuffing another to let off his ill-humour. His master was going on the morrow to the wars ; the house was to be closed, and he left in charge with two servants ; and if the devil

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did not come, with all his crew, to inhabit the vacant rooms, 'twould be no fault of these profane revellers.

To Everard the feast seemed like one in a fantastic dream. He could not listen to the overflowing talk, because of the agitation of his own disturbed thoughts, that were to him noisier than the babel of his guests. He listened, and laughed, and answered a question now and then, quite unconscious of what he heard, or of what he said.

"The Count Alberto, I hear, is returning to Bresali," announced the Master of the Ceremonies to his neighbour, in a loud confidential whisper. Stevio Calmani pricked his ears and stooped forward. He was a pale youth, somewhat dishevelled, and attired with less magnificence than his companions—indeed, he bore signs of genteel poverty about his person with the unashamed negligence of a noble to whom the poverty of his great house were an honour others could envy.

"'Tis ever the signal for riotous doings

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when Alberto pays us a visit, though he is little pleased himself at such," answered his companion, also under his breath; but the news fled down the table. Stevio Calmani all but bounded to his feet. "Everard," he said, "the Count Alberto is returning."

"What is Alberto to me?" answered Val Dernement listlessly.

"He should be everything. Alberto the Great he shall be called in future ages—Saviour of Bresali—the conqueror of evil!"

"Hush! hush! young sir, I beg of you," remonstrated the Master of Ceremonies; "this is veritable treason. We will all be strung up before morning if such words reach the Duke! 'Tis said that walls have ears; that is nothing, the very waves of the air in Bresali are messengers of Cosmo's. Here of all places 'tis dangerous," he ended in a mumble, adding, "The son of Dernement must not be suspect." The words seemed to slip past the guests to Everard, who fired suddenly at the sound of them. "And why not, my lord?" he said.

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A sudden silence fell round the table, and every one set to chewing a mouthful.

"Loyalty is ever a politic virtue," snapped the Master of Ceremonies, his nose deep in his cup.

Everard smiled. "I would have no feigned loyalty at Dernement," he answered. "The name of Cosmo is cursed here, you know, for all time." He laughed again. "Let the air carry that to the tyrant every hour that he breathes if need be. To your good health!" he added gravely.

"To Alberto!" shouted Calmani on his feet, his goblet high in the air.

"To Alberto!" echoed the somewhat irresponsible youths about him, carried by a sudden wave of enthusiasm that was likely enough to endanger their necks.

Everard remained seated, pale and impassive. Political enthusiasm seemed a paltry matter when the killing of his enemy was at hand; and then—they were drunk! After a brief pause he rose, and, to the amazement

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of his guests, he declared his intention of leaving them for a short while, "quite a short while," he insisted. There was a matter of import he must needs attend to. He stood in the flare of the light, his young head thrown up, a crimson spot on either cheek, and a wanton smile about his boyish mouth. "Gentlemen, you will stay till my return. 'Tis a command; and this," he said, holding a goblet aloft, "to the success of my enterprise."

They all rose to their feet and drank the toast, when a little person, with one leg striped and the other plain, and possessed of a tunic half white and half scarlet, with devices emblazoned on his breast, murmured,—

"Fie! Val Dernement; I thought I knew thee well. 'Tis a wench, I swear. Thou'rt a sly villain, and deservest that we all accompany thee!"

A shout of delighted acquiescence greeted the proposition.

"Faith! we will, unless thou'lt confess," said another.

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"Confess, confess!" they clamoured. "Val, thou hast hoodwinked us all. Oh, Val! but in honour of this occasion we will overlook it, if thou'lt confess!"

"Aye, will I confess," he answered with the same strange smile. "I have wooed her—shall we say for years?—unsuccessfully, I assure you. To-night, the saints be willing, she shall be mine!"

"Val, dear Val, pray take me with thee," interrupted a sleepy-eyed noble, whose wine was steadily going upwards in his person towards the bigger vacuum aloft, "I do passionately adore other people's ladies."

But Val Dernement had escaped from their midst. Outside, he held the doors behind him for a moment's space of time, with a passing fear that they would in truth follow him; the idea caught at his imagination with a certain grim horror. They would make no bones over the doing of such a deed. He had but to ask them, and these gaily bedecked lordlings, the scarlet imps with horns, and

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saints in green and purple, would rush ahead with him across the dark roads, scaling the walls like coloured monkeys, as they had indeed in the morning, with less fell purpose ; and it would mean death to every one of them. Duke Cosmo would show no mercy to the assassins of his favourite. The pitiless potentate would revel in such a butchering. The boy caught his breath at the thought, and, releasing the handles of the door, sped across the great hall and down a deserted corridor, lit here and there by smouldering torches stuck in iron hoops in the wall ; thence through some winding passages to a smaller hall, almost dark, at the further end of which was a wide, low archway, known as the Eastern Gate. It was little used, if ever, and the heavy chains needed much undoing before he could wrench the great door open. He bent an ear before doing so, to catch the sound of any footsteps that might have followed, still, in thought, fancying the little crowd swarming after him ; but silence seemed to return on the wave of

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sound with a buffet,—noisy, tangible, conscious silence! Then he undid the chain with hasty hands. Was the stranger waiting? Would he be there? Was he a reality? He flung back the doors impetuously, unable to bear the doubt. A flood of moonlight burst upon him and the fair, quiet scene of the country under a clear sky; the pale moon aloft, and a thousand stars palpitating in the luminous darkness of the mysterious heavens, revealing depth upon depth of beautiful space, spangle hung too, reaching no-whither, for ever beginning—the universe revealed to little earth.

The ground before him rose, a white road—a wide pathway seeming to touch these same skies—descending later down into the valley hidden beneath the low ridge.

There was no one there. He glanced hurriedly about, the feeling of hopelessness growing more acute with each moment of disappointment. His revenge, then, was not at hand; the stranger had been but some unreal tormentor, his visit a dream.

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A great sense of weariness came with the reaction from the several hours of restrained excitement. He looked up at the wide heavens, and yearned that his spirit might be freed and be of that great calm soon. The very strength of the young life in him had of late pressed heavily on the boy. He had become conscious of the pain of unreasonable, passionate emotion that swept through his being: the weight of untried wings; a great longing for the intangible, the unknown, accompanied by an immense physical co-operation. His blood would fire at a thought, till the abstract vaguery became an absorbing sensation. The yearning for the sweetness of things had come between him and his hitherto all paramount desire for revenge, or the mere common pleasures of boyhood, and with it a tiredness—a spiritual exhaustion from the overmastering vigour of the body.

Gradually a faint noise mingled with his thoughts, keeping a kind of time to them, which he hardly heeded, till the steady mono-

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tonous repetition of it, growing louder and louder, made his heart leap with the thought that it was the sound of approaching horses' hoofs ; and then, suddenly before him, up on that white road, as if riding out from that infinite universe, appeared the stranger on horseback, leading a riderless mare by his side, his armour ablaze in the white light.

CHAPTER VII

EVERARD leaped to the saddle before the stranger had barely drawn rein. "Let us go," he said eagerly; "my guests have a notion 'twould be sport to follow!"

The stranger turned his eyes to the boy for a short moment with a look of irresolution, as if this fair, agile youth, so astonishingly beautiful, were after all something of an irresponsible child, still too young to enter into such a matter, and that 'twould be better to ride away, leaving him his innocence a little while longer.

He tried to discover hesitancy in the boy's manner, some fright in this very haste, that might prove him of a baser metal—if good enough for the night's deed—so that it should seem less a despoiling of so fair a soul's integrity. The youth, however, sat firmly to

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his horse, displaying only a slight look of impatience and questioning wonder in his young eyes.

"Shall we not hasten?" he said.

"Bind your eyes with this," answered the stranger, "so that you cannot in any way see!" and he thrust a scarf across to the boy, who did his bidding quickly enough.

"Is it well fastened?"

"Perfectly!"

"You cannot see?"

"No."

"Come, then!" He turned his horse, and the two started at a walk to the foot of the ridge. There they halted, and, after a moment's pause, Everard felt that his horse was being led round in a circle, so that when they started again, in a quicker canter this time, he could not tell whether they had taken the road to the right or to the left. They went in silence for a good quarter of an hour. Then the boy said,—

"Why did you blindfold me?"

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"You blindfolded yourself!"

"You ordered it, my master," said Val Dernement with a faint smile. Evidently this stranger had no will to take any responsibility.

"Good, my pupil, and you were wise enough to obey first and question after. It is a rare virtue to obey unquestioningly."

Everard thought he caught something of a sneer in the tone, and it flashed upon him that after all he had only this man's word concerning the matter in hand. What if he were but being led to his own death? The Duke had thought proper to get rid of his father on the false accusation of treason; might he not wish to rid himself of the son who must, on attaining manhood, be his bittermost enemy? For the moment, these reflections sent a cold shudder through the boy, and, as he received no further answer to his question, he began to meditate as to whether it would not be the wiser plan to tear off the bandage he had at any rate voluntarily submitted to, as his companion had said, surely, too, with something of that same

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sneer. But recollection of the stranger's whole demeanour, of a certain noble bearing that gave the lie to any summing up against him, put to shame these paltry fears. If he could not trust this man, then life was a poor concern, and he had better be out of it than not! So he sat closer to his saddle, and throwing up his flaxen head, he rode silently on, with the determination neither to fear nor doubt his companion. His lips I think, were hard set, for a smile stole over the stranger's face as he watched him, and he said more kindly,—

“You are too good, you know, to lose in a paltry matter of this kind.”

“You flatter me, sir.”

“You understand that if you know neither the name of the man you are going to visit to-night, nor the road that leads to his palace, nor in any way the whereabouts of it, the rack cannot make you confess what would be to your own condemnation.”

“The Duke will make a hue and cry, then?” said Everard.

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"He will hunt the place like a bloodhound, and hang a man or two to show that he is earnest."

"Why have you waited so long?" said Everard suddenly. The words leapt to his mouth before he had hardly conceived the question, and as soon as they were formulated the idea took a stronger hold of him. The stranger was not as he had first thought, avenging the death of Val Dernement, else why had he waited. There had surely been other opportunities, in those years past, to rid the world of this foreign monster.

The stranger paused, then he said slowly, "We were not aware then of the identity of our enemy. We had blamed another with whom it is not time yet to reckon."

"You mean the Duke?"

The stranger did not answer.

"My father was one of your party?" asked the boy.

"I have no party. He fired certain hot heads with an enthusiasm for my person. It

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will cost them their lives as it cost him his. You see you will be, as myself, concerned unwittingly in the death of these men. We can but both do our utmost."

"Why did you choose to-night?"

"Ah!" said the man impatiently, as one annoyed with the whole matter. "I heard of the affair on my arrival to-day at Bresali, and, by an odd coincidence, of your celebrations. There was not a moment to be lost, nor a soul to be trusted. I had a mind to risk saving their necks at our expense . . . and the devil keep you all from politics in future."

"Is this man well known in Bresali?" said Everard.

"Hardly at all. He is a foreigner and half a recluse ; yet he is acquainted with the affairs and secrets of almost every soul in the province. To the people he is quite unknown ; though I have seen his sinister figure gliding among them at odd times—at dusk, or in the market-place at noon—with the simple expression on his face of one in his dotage,

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watery eyed, and harmless looking as a sucking babe. He is wise enough never to be seen in public with the Duke, and hardly ever at Court. Nevertheless, for years he has had the ear of Cosmo, and influenced him in all his administrations. A secret influence you see, little likely to raise the envy of ambitious courtiers. They ignore him—a pleasant old noble, to be stumbled on in the Duke's library poring over Greek manuscripts. What dream they of the wolf in sheep's clothing? "

The stranger ceased speaking, and the two rode on in silence.

The wolf! reiterated the boy to himself over and over again. The wolf! It was the wolf he was going to kill; the wolf—the wolf! Now, in his mental vision of his father's head on the rampart, was added that of the four-footed creature whose white teeth were buried in the neck of the dead man. In the recollection of his dying mother, again the wolf's head peered between the curtains of the bed, green eyed and voracious, walking away after

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his work was done in the form of an old man, harmless and unobserved ; but once out of sight, the wolf again, crawling and scrambling where no human creature could go, to get a knowledge of his victims' lives, the weak points in their strongholds. One moment he is an old man whispering in the Duke's ear ; gradually his face turns into that of the wolf ; when the Duke looks round he is the old man again. They were hunting the wolf, the monster wolf, the human wolf ! There would be no wrong in killing such a creature. Would they never be there ? His blood was hot now for the deed. Must this riding go on for ever—till his heart grew cold again, and the shrinking from murder returned to him ?

Suddenly the horses came to a standstill. The boy was told to remove his bandage ; and, as he did so, the soft air beat upon his burning eyes and heated forehead. They were close under the very walls of a great palace, evidently at the back of it, for the soft turf

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came right to their feet. There was no road visible, and the ground sloped gradually to a wide river that gleamed in the pale light of the moon. Immediately in front of them was a small postern door.

"Whatever happens, I will wait for you here," said the stranger, as the boy slipped from his horse. Then he gave him a key, and no more words were spoken between them. Everard inserted it in the lock and turned it almost silently ; he pushed the door, and it gave easily enough inwards, with a little creak. As he passed through, he caught a glimpse of the arabesque on the framework of the arch, and noticed that the design had, interwoven, a wolf's head among the fruit and flowers and tender leaves of the border. This trivial detail, yet fantastic coincidence, impressed the boy in a momentary flash. The wolf's head poisoning the fresh green things with its horrible breath, burying its fangs in the luscious fruit !

CHAPTER VIII

PAST the threshold, Everard found himself in total darkness. He pushed the door to behind him, and then moved warily forwards with hands outstretched. Almost immediately his foot came in contact with the first step of a stairway. He discovered it went up steeply, and understood that it could not be long before he would be in the presence of the man he had come to kill, if no intercepting passage separated the tower from the room described by the stranger, which overlooked the grounds they had crossed. The rush of his thoughts became suddenly checked, and one predominant consideration possessed him—the question of how to gain access to the upper chamber noiselessly. Supreme attention to the minutest details of sound and movement absorbed all his senses. He

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mounted each separate step with the deliberate care and silence of a lithe young animal instinctively conscious that an inopportune move, the noise of a stumble, might betray its presence to a deadly enemy. Stealthily he ascended, dagger in hand, peering forward to catch any gleam of light that should warn him he had gained the head of the staircase, and relieve his eyes from the strain of staring into the terrible darkness from which any moment a hidden varlet might spring upon him. He wondered if the door above might not be locked, and paused for a moment, discouraged at the thought, then stole on once more, till a flood of light round the last bend brought him again to a standstill. There was no inner door, only a half-curtained archway. His path was clear. Another short flight and he would be there. He clutched his weapon tighter, took a sudden breath, and still cautiously, though with more certain foothold, he climbed the remaining stairs. At the top, however, he halted, and clutched at the curtain. The room

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swam before his eyes, then became marvelously clear and distinct ; a beautiful room, with books and statues about, and in the centre a frail old man writing quietly at a table, with the benign look on his face of simple kind-heartedness.

Where was his enemy, then ? Where was his enemy ? Or what inhuman plot was this he was taking part in, what monstrous idea that he should come at night and slay a feeble scholar smiling over his books ?

Had the aged man looked up from his writing then, and turned his eyes a little in the rear, he would have seen a trembling youth, standing dagger in hand, with the look of one pursued on his fair, boyish face, wide eyed and terror-stricken. For the view of his enemy, writing at a table there, nothing but a very weak old man, with sparse white locks on his temples, and swollen-veined, wrinkled hands, sickened Everard with shame. He forgot the wolf for the sheep's clothing, and almost laughed out loud, at last, at the thought

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of the monstrosity of such a deed as this he had thought of committing. He turned to go—to defy the stranger—fight rather to save the old man than slay him, when a name upon the parchment, surely enough one of many, caught his attention and burned into his brain with awful significance.

It was that of his friend, Stevio Calmani—Stevio, who was feasting now at Dernement—his guest : a bright, dear creature with ever a quaint word on the tip of his tongue that would set them all laughing ; older than themselves in years, the philosopher they called him, yet a greater child than them all in spirit. Val Dernement followed the accusation against his name. He bent forward dangerously near the writer. He could see 'twas Stevio's. Stevio was to be hanged, with those others, on the morrow, for a light word of his against the Duke, spoken when the wine was in his head ; or because he was a supporter of the rising party against the tyrant's policy, and that not actively — Stevio, their dear Stevio. Spell-

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bound Val Dernement watched the wolf at last, watched the old fingers creep along the page to a full stop, then, returning to the name, add a laboured flourish under it, watched his head turn a little to one side in pleased admiration of his own penmanship. Thus had he written his father's name—with a flourish!

“Damnable wolf of hell!” cried the boy in a sudden frenzy.

The old man started. An ashen hue spread over his withered countenance as he stared at the apparition of the infuriated boy so strangely like that other Val Dernement, that it seemed this must be the spirit of him. During a trivial moment superstitious dread paralysed his reasoning; then quick knowledge of the truth flashed upon his mind—a mind used to grasp the minutest details of a possible situation and to forestall any resultant by instantaneous action. Now, by a sudden dexterous movement, he extinguished the light burning by his side, and the room was left in total darkness.

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For an appreciable time Everard was bewildered. He sprang to the table, and seizing a roll of paper thrust it into the embers of the fire, flickering low at the back of a deeply recessed chimney, too confined to throw any light into the room, and raised the flaming sheet above him. His companion was crouching down as one about to spring, and Everard realized, that to escape, the old man must pass him to get to the door. A sense of horrible sickness came over him; he dropped the paper and springing forward he stabbed frightfully, terribly, in the very horror of the deed doing his work over well; morally shrinking, he blindly repeated the blow.

Then there was an awful silence. He stole to the table to secure the incriminating writings and some tablets evidently containing notes from which his victim had been copying. The paper smouldered out upon the floor just as he was able to seize the parchment scroll and thrust it in the breast of his tunic. Again the room was in absolute darkness. He stumbled

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to the body, and, stooping down, listened for the sound of breathing. "Speak, speak," he murmured in a whisper, and waited, hoping, unreasonably enough, that life were not extinct, that his sword thrust had killed the hideous soul of him, but that this body, this old man, warm and breathing so short a time ago, might breath again, might speak. Alive, he could bear him away, hide him somewhere, imprison him if must be, implore him, force him, persuade him, at last, to be a less vile creature.

He heard a noise without ; some one was coming. He must get away, yet he knew not how to rise to go. He had killed his enemy, and he dared not move, he dared not get up and go. Let them come and kill him here, that would be best. The blood of this man was on his soul.

"Dead ! art dead ?" he cried hysterically. "Wilt have me with thee?" and he laid his hand near the heart of the prostrate body to feel only the movement of oozing blood.

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He thrust his fingers into the bosom of his own tunic to get rid of the wetness. His fingers came in contact with the parchment list. "Ah! the list!" The touch of it brought at once to his mind the vital importance of immediate flight—for Stevio's sake, for the sake too of those other names written in the perfect writing of his victim, with fanciful flourishes. He could see those old fingers now, in the darkness, toying preliminarily with the pen before adding the last finish to his handiwork.

This pleasant beauty, given for the love of delicate detail to this scroll selling the bodies of men, the æsthetic dalliance—ah! it had been awful; but it had given him courage to do his work. His work—but he must not be caught, the list was still upon him. Stevio had yet to be saved. They were coming even now. He rose, quickened to activity again by thought of his friend's immediate danger, and flew across the room and down the winding stairs, silently to the postern door. It was shut. Doubtless the stranger had closed it

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for prudence sake. He pressed the latch. It would not yield. He knocked quietly, and called under his breath. No one answered. The door was locked, and he was a prisoner with his dead.

CHAPTER IX

WAVE upon wave of paralysing terror possessed Everard as he realized more fully every moment the cruel hopelessness of his situation. He endeavoured to press his fingers into the crack of the heavy door and tear it open, as an animal might, leaning his young body against it in impotent, awful endeavour, quivering with the strain of physical and mental exertion, insisting with all his will that this awful thing was not so, yet catching again at the truth with a new horror each time, and a renewed straining of his muscles against the material fact. And then he ceased—ceased resisting, ceased protesting, and stood, in the shadowy darkness, listening for the sound of steps that must inevitably come sooner or later from above. A merciful calmness gradually possessed him as no immediate sound reached

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his ears and he remembered the incident of the extinguished light. Some hope faced him in this. There was little probability of any one entering the room till morning, and meanwhile might not his friend in some way attempt a rescue, if he had not intentionally deserted him. The boy sat down on the stairs, suddenly tired. He pressed his head in his hands and waited. His thoughts stole through his mind lazily now, as if they were those of another person that he was able to visualize. He forgot his imminent danger—death, that was so very near him—in the contemplation of the crime he had just committed and the hopeless impossibility of going back on his steps—undoing the terrible deed. Nothing could ever be quite the same as before the committal of it. He experienced the restless misery of a girl who has unwillingly lost her virtue, and knows that no repentance, no denying, no forgetting, no reasoning, could quite wipe out the blemish. His innocence was gone, and though Manhood seemed to proclaim coldly, *This deed*

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is virtually insignificant — such a miscreant's life was a stain upon the earth — you have killed the pestilent monster, Innocence surely cried, *Thou hast slain me too, I am dying at thy feet ; thou canst never know me again in the world.* A shudder went through the boy of him, as the man gazed suddenly wide-eyed on the long vistas of life before him wherein he would take no count of such deeds as this.

A drowsiness, which he tried in vain to keep at bay, overpowered his brain at last, and he fell asleep huddled in the corner, a foot forward ready to spring alert. Dreams troubled him in this drowsing—strange, frightening, ominous visions, in which his soul was surely tossed about at the mercy of some element full of life, as if the winds of heaven and the seas had become embodied, creatures half human, half spirits, sinister and warning. And then it seemed that the corpse of the murdered man descended the stairs and embraced his person in an awful grip, and leered into his face with

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the shining eyes of a wolf. He started awake with a cry, and found that something of morning had crept under the crack of the door, pale and colourless still, the first white moment before the coming of the warm sun, and fear again possessed him ; not that of a timorous boy,—all that pertained to boyhood had slipped from him for ever,—but the conscious horror of a man entrapped in a hole from which there was no outlet.

The household would soon be roused, not quite yet perhaps—the light was faint, but soon enough. Would they kill him there or take him before the Duke, the merciless tyrant who delighted in the torturing of his victims ? He determined they should not take him alive. He watched the shadows fading, and the grey light creeping into the corners of the staircase, rising step by step, slowly, surely, as if to seek out the murdered man and throw light on the dastardly act, that the early risers might come and see, and hasten to capture the assassin. And with the rising of that light, despair

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deepened into Everard's soul. Death, then, would soon be upon him.

Suddenly the light he was watching widened perceptibly in another direction. He looked hastily at the door. It was moving slowly and silently from without. Was it an enemy or the stranger? If an enemy, then he would kill him, and escape to the free air over his body. He clutched his weapon, and waited that he might get at a disadvantage whoever entered. His heart stood still as a hand appeared. He noted a costly ring, and shuddered. Who was the silent intruder at this strange hour?

* * * *

Some time after Everard had disappeared through the postern door, the stranger caught the sound of voices coming suddenly from out of the darkness. He sat for a moment to consider how near the speakers could be, and realizing that they were not far off, decided at once that their attention must be diverted, at any rate, from the immediate vicinity of the palace. He bent forward and locked the door,

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securing the key. The lad were safer where none could get at him from without ; then he turned and rode slowly forward into full view of a couple of guards a moment later—night watches who must have discovered him in a very short space of time. He kept his back to them and rode slowly from the palace. He heard the two men stop, and then, after a pause, doubtless caused by the shock of his appearance, start on in evident pursuit. He did not alter his pace, with the idea of allaying suspicion, and of bringing them as far from the hearing of any slumbering varlets whom they might otherwise call to their assistance. Some little way off he drew rein and dismounted. One of the two had drawn dangerously near the horses.

. . . A sudden flash of blades and the foremost watch fell prostrate.

The wretched guard had been taken at a disadvantage. Undecided as to whether this stranger, casually riding away, were an enemy or not, he had approached, with some hesitancy,

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several yards ahead of the other who only realized the seriousness of the affair when he saw his comrade fall dead at his feet ; he had not had time even to attempt a warding off the fell blow. He leapt forward with overmastering rage and fought at first confidently, at last desperately. His antagonist seemed superhumanly strong, and superhumanly dexterous. As the duel continued in the silence of the night, the unhappy man felt that no end could come to it but through his own death. A sudden superstitious notion that he was fighting some emissary of evil, some phantom being of another world, began to paralyse his senses. His hands trembled, and the ghastly palor of fear spread over his face. He thrust wildly, but the iron guard of his antagonist was impassable. Once he thought he had given a deadly thrust, blood was on his sword, yet the return attack was wielded with unabated strength. Demoralized by the re-conviction that it was no mortal he had entered into combat with, the wretched peasant, a brave

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enough man at times, and a strong fighter, bethinking himself of his sins, repented thereof in quick time, stared suddenly fascinated by the gleam of the fatal weapon—the devil's surely—and practically uncovered his breast for the death blow.

* * * *

The early light of morning was spreading over the world. The stranger drew the bodies of the men into the shadow of the trees with some difficulty, then hastened to the release of Val Dernement. With a flowing wound he found it impossible to mount unassisted, and was obliged to drag himself, as best he could, to the postern.

Then Everard within saw the door suddenly flung wide and the figure of the stranger before him; and beyond, the great country under the light of dawn—a globe of crimson hanging on the edge of the distant horizon, and a faint breeze rising everywhere, bearing the gift of life and freedom in its breath.

“Come!” said the stranger, and Everard

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caught sight of blood on the gleaming armour. In a moment they were outside, stealing along on foot, in the shadow of the house. They had locked the postern behind them. Everard thought he had heard a noise above in the chamber as the key was turned.

"Where are the horses?" he said despondently. "We can never get away like this."

The stranger did not answer, but stumbled even more slowly along the turf, dragging his feet heavily.

"Shall we not hasten?" said the boy.

"Yes, we will hasten," answered his companion, and made an effort to move more quickly that proved wholly unsuccessful: he seemed unable to draw one foot after the other, and stopped at last abruptly. "I cannot go any further. Go you. The horses are quite a little way off across the open, in the shadow of those trees, too far for me. Hasten Derne-ment, or it will be too late; ride with all thy might, anywhere, so long as it be ahead!"

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"You are wounded," cried Everard in dismay.

"Why, yes!" answered the stranger somewhat testily; "hasten on. There will be no one to stop you, I have made that all safe." He leaned against the wall, then slipped heavily to the ground. "Curse them," he said, and looked pitifully up at the boy; "for God's sake go on!"

Everard knelt down and hastily tore off the heavy armour. The stranger watched his doings with a queer expression in his eyes, half humorous, half pathetic. "What a devil of a lad you are!" he said weakly; "why do you not go? We shall both be taken, and turned into mince-meat before long, if you do not get away."

"They'll have a good supply, then, for we won't be the only contributions," said Everard.

"They'll outnumber us by a dozen, you wise ape. Go, for pity's sake, go!"

"I am going, I am going now," returned the boy, whilst he tore strips of linen from his

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shirt, and bound up the wound of the prostrate man. "Indeed, I am going." He looked eagerly into the other's face, then seizing the pieces of armour in his arms, he hastened down the slope to the wide river, and cast them in, where they sank at once beneath the dark waters ; then he fled across the ground that separated him from the horses.

The wounded man watched the hurrying figure till it was lost among the trees, a drawn look of pain on his face, as of one trying not to think he had been deserted. He had felt passionately anxious for the safety of the boy ; yet now he was gone something tightened about his heart. He meditated how soon it would be before the alarm would be given, and yearned for the company of the youth. He found himself wondering if he must necessarily have gone, and hotly decided in the affirmative. What else could the lad do ? Why should he have given up his young life ? He had not asked to come on this expedition, and he had, so far, been brave

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enough. Ah! but if only he had not gone! He gazed wearily towards the distant wood, and then tried to rise to seek some safer place of hiding, when he perceived, coming at a quick canter out of the shadow, the two horses, the boy astride one, his young head bent eagerly forward, and his flaxen hair streaming in the wind. "Good God! he is mad, stark mad! He will be shot by the archers from the palace windows. Go back, go back!" He waved a desperate hand, but the boy rode on nearer and nearer, gripping the saddle with his knees, and urging the two creatures forward.

* * * *

They escaped under the very eyes of the awakening house. No one happened just to look that way, and once the wounded man had scrambled into the saddle, less a difficult feat now that he was free of the heavy armour, the horses leapt ahead through the greyness of the morning mists. Everard looked at nothing about him: the scenery

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flashed past only as so many repetitions of shadowy masses. He clung to his beast with a tightened grip that conveyed to the animal something of their dread haste; and his thoughts stood still, the physical man of him uppermost. The instinct of self-preservation, their success so far, the sweeping past of the morning air that tingled on his cheeks and carried off moodiness with swift insistence, were the only conscious sensations that animated the flying boy on that long ride.

They pulled up at the cross roads, not very far from Dernement, and for a moment the stranger looked at Everard without speaking. The boy slipped from his horse and waited. Something in the aspect of his companion—the grave, strong face bent towards his—and his own willing submission, the sudden remembrance again—he knew not why it should come to him at such a moment—of his mother's ceremonious reception of this stranger, her actual devotion, deepened in him a sense of awe, and the thought flashed

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through his mind that the night's work—which had cost himself so much—had been a magnanimous stooping of the great man to do a kindly act that the lives of such as he and his companions might be saved at the risk of his own—surely of greater value than theirs! The boy uncovered his head as the stranger said, with a sweetness that was part of his strength, "I shall not forget you, Dernement. God be with you! I must hence now, or there may still be trouble!" The horses sprang forward again, and Everard was alone.

He walked the little way that divided him from Dernement, and, as he approached the walls, an odd feeling possessed him that the face of everything had changed; that he himself were a new person entering the home of his childhood; that the cloud of the un-avenged had been lifted, but with its rising something else had fled too. The place seemed strange, and he a stranger.

He stole into the great hall, where the

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morning light had already crept apace, isolating the flicker of the torches still alight, only yellow tongues now in the whitened atmosphere about. He hesitated on the threshold, for his guests were all there still, stretched on the floor, and benches, and half across the table, in the silence of sleep. A horned devil had his head cushioned on the breast of an aureoled angel, whose aureole had slipped awry; yet in his sleep the young face looked the part well enough. The Master of Ceremonies dozed in a high-backed chair, even in his not too sober rest retaining a certain pompous dignity.

In the pale light it all reminded Everard of death. He seemed to see among them that other figure doubled up and bloody, and he shuddered as he picked his way to the side of Stevio Calmani, who was stretched on a bench, clinging still to his goblet. How many more toasts had he drunk? Such toasts that, but for this night's deed, must have strung him on high before noon. He

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endeavoured to shake him into wakefulness, but with little result ; then he picked up the tablets that were half out of his doublet, and scratched on them—Suspect—leave Bresali—Everard. And after a pause—a moment's look round of good-bye, as it were, to his home, to his companions, to his youth, and to the sorrow of the past that seemed, now that it was avenged, so distant—of such a long ago—he stole out again, and, hastening to his own room, he changed his yellow tunic for a leather one and breastplate, and his embroidered hood for a steel cap ; so that by the time a very sleepy-eyed groom had bestirred himself to bring his master's horse to the door at break of day as he had had orders to do, Everard was there waiting.

AN INTERLUDE

UP the hill women and children streamed towards the chapel on the heights, to throw flowers before the warrior men carried on a shield in their midst. The chapel, ancient even then, was perched aloft, its fragile columns and rising cupola visible for miles round, with the attached convent buildings. The sun, on this evening in a crimson blaze, covered it and the distant purple hills with one luminous canopy, whilst the battle-field below, strewn with dead men, in the blue shadows and rising mists, was already a forgotten tragedy. "*Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth, pleni sunt cœli et terra majestatis gloriæ tuæ.*"

Two years had elapsed since Everard left his home in the early morning with the burden of a murder on his young shoulders, and something of the new responsibility of life in his

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heart. He had gone to the wars in the south a grave youth, whom the rougher adventurers found not very good company ; yet whose sword thrusts were sufficiently formidable to command their respect, and a sneaking devotion from the coward.

It happened, after eighteen months of rather wearisome campaign under the Emperor, during which the enemy had barely been kept at bay, that a decisive battle was to be fought. Few of the troops were eager, for the mercenaries on either side—and they outnumbered their companions by three to one—were anxious to prolong the war, since a very excellent livelihood depended upon its continuance. Matters were understood between them. Blows were not to be mortally dealt, so that, with the exception of a few serious engagements, an absurd game of fighting had so far been indefinitely prolonged. This battle had promised no change from the usual order of things, though preparations were gravely undergone, and, in fact, a more martial spirit crept insidiously

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through the camp. The minority of honest companies were sick of the year's inactivity and sham fightings, whilst the others shook themselves together with the sudden notion that serious business was to be the order of the day in spite of themselves; and their fattened persons were ready to take it not amiss if such were the case. A new commander had arrived from the north, who was undoubtedly of a different metal to the indolent noble who had so far mismanaged the campaign. However, during the engagement the half-hearted efforts of the opponent armies continued. Hope of a serious encounter fell; attempts were frustrated on all sides. The more eager soldiers desisted when they found the noisy clamour around them, the more noisy that it was meaningless—that their own lives were being given for nothing, and their comrades fooling the day again. If a brave man on either side met, there was a deadly duel enough, but their bodies on the field added nothing to the honour of a drawn game.

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At last Everard, roused to a frenzy, rode in alone among the enemy. His sword flashed high for a moment, then fell again and again with deadly effect. He came among them as one possessed: active resistance on the one side, and a sudden rallying on the other ensued; for the scoundrelly mercenaries became men once the quick were touched. The view of his slim figure on horseback, leaping into the heart of danger, to be assailed instantly by twenty thrusts likely to prove mortal, stirred a passionate wave of enthusiasm among them. A shout went through the lines, and a violent rush, deadly as it was unpremeditated, bore down on the surprised enemy. The new commander observed from his vantage point the manoeuvres of the audacious youth, and sent word to his officers to press forward and follow up the attack.

The details of this remarkable victory over an enemy hitherto impossible to repulse—its sudden routing and the terrible slaughter upon the field—are set forth in the chronicles of the

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period, and in later historical compilations, at great length ; we have only to do with the evening of that memorable day, and with the youth who turned the tide of European affairs by the whim of a tired moment. Let us to it then, he had felt, and actually cried, "To hell with the heathens!"—a pious ejaculation in those days, and one always acted upon. They were dispatched in hot haste.

The young hero was seized upon by friendly hands from under his own horse's feet, and carried away upon a shield. His wounds were dressed ; they were awful wounds, and he must needs lie still. They brought him the news of the success, admiration in their eyes. "To you, to you the glory," they were saying about him, and he only dimly caught their meaning, for bodily pain was heavy upon him. In the evening he was carried on the shield up the steep way to a chapel on the height, where a Te Deum was to be sung after vespers in thanksgiving for the victorious day.

The altar was ablaze and the incense rose

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in clouds, as the company of soldiers bore their leader up the aisle and stood through the ceremony, the prostrate man with his hands crossed, not in death, but humble thanksgiving to his Maker for life. Among the worshippers was a tall slender girl, one Pilar Maruri, of noble birth—surely the sweet saint of that painted window, dusky-haired and pale, her lips parted, and her wondrous eyes full of tears as they rested on him with the blessed pity of a dear woman. Gradually the colour rose to Everard's face, and all the suffering of his life seemed as nothing—the heat of the battle a moment's pain, his aching wounds warm springs of rejoicing, and the triumphant hymn that rose about him, of an angel's choir, . . . for their eyes still rested on one another's.

After the ceremony he was conveyed to the house of her guardian, by some strange accident of fortune—an abbé, who boasted a spacious house, and insisted on receiving the day's hero. She came to his room at night, in the company of an old lady, a sister of the Abbé, who kept

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his house and watched over their wealthy charge during this stay with her cousin. The old dame must needs dress his wounds and fuss about him, a fussing he bore with patience, since he might rest his half-closed eyes on the tall girl who stood a little way off holding a cup of sweet scents in one hand, and linen in the other, with a grace that denoted she was of gentler breeding than her companion. The ancient dame was masterful in her potterings; Everard nevertheless discovered that she was in truth subservient to her companion. The thought that this gracious being had voluntarily come to administer to him, brought the colour again to his cheeks in a leaping sense of gratitude that swept physically through his person.

On those first evenings no words passed between them, and since that one look vouchsafed in the chapel—that look of profound pity and admiration merely for a wounded soldier, he reasoned to himself—her eyes had avoided his. Once he woke up and found her seated by his side, and, with a sudden shock of pain,

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observed the severity of her gown, the nun-like pose of her figure, the white fingers that closed on a rosary, and the veil that covered the flowing dusky hair.

“ I will read to my lord, if my lord will,” she said very gently, and for a moment her grey eyes were turned to his. These were the first words she had spoken to him. Insignificant enough, yet the low beautiful voice seemed to wrap up his senses in a cloak of sound that became tangible, and soft, and healing. He dared not answer her, lest his own speaking might dispel the vision of her presence near him—wake himself from too sweet a dream ; but he tried to hold her eyes a little while longer, and from his there came that reverent, appealing look that steals from the lover to a maid when passion has first awakened in him, rushing to his body from the soul. Her lids hovered a moment, then fell, and the beautiful red mouth opened to pronounce the words written in her book. . . .

He learnt in the evening from his host that

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she was to enter a convent. He paled on hearing of her determination, and his lips trembled as he tried to expostulate with the Abbé against such a notion for so beautiful a girl, still too young to realize the meaning of a vocation.

The Abbé smiled coldly. His grey eyes seemed to glitter as he watched the sick man. "I cannot agree with you," he said ; "she is being given every opportunity to see something of the world. She does not care for it. She will not, of course, enter a convent for some time ; it is her wish not to as yet. She is very learned, you know, and wrapped up in her books. Her father was a great scholar, and many of his most valuable volumes, those at any rate of a religious kind, are to be presented to the convent."

He saw her again on the morrow, and during his convalescence many times. The old lady was generally in the room, or the Abbé. These two, in her presence, seemed like attendants rather than guardians. They hovered about

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her nervously ; and the benign gravity of her bearing, the tender humbleness of her expression, the sweeping robes, the white hands, suggested so much that was spiritual, that the warm beauty that was still of the girl became almost religiously attractive. As the days went by she visited his chamber less often. "She is at her devotions," explained the Abbé, and Everard must needs accept the explanation. How could he tell this Churchman all that burned in his heart to be said. When the morning of his departure came, his host in no way pressed a prolonging of the visit, and Everard knew that he had divined his secret.

They met afterwards in the orchard, where she habitually walked, reading her books. He came on the pretext of seeing the Abbé, and managed, as lovers have ever done, to visit the villa during his host's absence. In this way they became friends. She received him with an ingenuous simplicity, frankly ignoring the fact that their interviews were stolen ; indeed, Everard wondered if she wholly understood

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this, or if it were not the priest and old dame who had to plot secretly to keep them apart. He began to understand something of her influence in this household—the power of one so extraordinarily endowed by nature, both physically and mentally. Superbly independent in spirit, her yielding or dependence in trivial matters seemed an expression of graciousness rather than submission, or of that characteristic loveliness that made the woman of her ever predominant.

One late afternoon, as they strolled under the trees, she told him, with a wistful look in her eyes, that she was dedicated to Holy Church. She stopped in her walk and looked away from him towards the hills. He bent and took the tips of her fingers in his, and laughed. "How absurd!" he said. She turned her eyes back to him without drawing away her hand, and he saw that she was frightened. Evening was following on the day after the setting of a red sun, and the orchard shimmered in the haze of that last coloured light before eventide. The

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intensity of a sudden passion unspoken between them, and for that reason strangely potent, held their eyes on one another's, and their finger-tips interlaced. The mystery of love, creeping upon each with the overwhelming joy that is fearful in its sweetness, kept them for a moment apart and paled their faces white as the apple blossoms overhead. "But you love me, Pilar?" His words broke on the quiet stillness of the air, humble, appealing.

"I love you," she answered, speaking as one in pain. He touched her closer, and she was close to him—warm and dear as heaven; and then it was dark, and she was gone, like a frightened creature swiftly through the long grass, trailing her loosened gown. He heard her go, and his love stole through his being and knocked at the door of a sleeping soul, and the universe seemed to throb in his pulses.

* * * *

He did not see her again. On the morrow the Abbé failed to leave home, but strolled

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the long afternoon in the orchard. The following day the same thing occurred. Everard braved an entry. The Abbé was courteous, pressed him to stay, and only towards evening casually explained that his ward was no longer with him. She had gone, then; fled away, leaving no word! He laughed, and said, "I will follow." He learnt later that she had gone to Court to visit the Duchess of Bresali, at the Court of Cosmo, Duke of Bresali, and still he said, "I will follow," though he paled at the thought. "I will cross my enemy's threshold," he said. An idle young noble staying at the inn where Val Dernement had taken up his abode since leaving the villa, murmured in his ear, "Cosmo loves her." He turned faint and sick, but he repeated, "I will follow her even to the lair of the Profligate."

Book II

THE GIFT OF LIFE

CHAPTER I

THE Lady Geraldine swept in on her companions, who were seated in the corner of the wide gallery, a little circle of them bending over a frame stretched with cloth they were scattering pink blossoms upon from their own pink-tipped fingers.

"Scandal, scandal! I have some scandal for you," she said, with a graceful wave of the hand; "in other words, news!"

The maids of honour declared that they were all ears.

"Well," said one.

"Thou keepest us waiting to provoke us," said another.

"Nay, tell us," exclaimed a third.

And the Lady Geraldine smiled with complacent satisfaction.

"You hardly give one time to speak," she answered airily.

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"Listen! The Lady Pilar Maruri—the lady who would be a nun, you know—comes to Court to-day!"

"No," said the first, pursing up her pretty mouth.

"Indeed!" said the second, and she twinkled.

"Well, since the Duke loves her, what else could you expect?" queried the smallest of three, they called Angelica.

"Hardly that he should bring the lady to meet his wife," said the fourth. She was inclined to be prim.

"Children, hush!" said Lady Geraldine. "Listen, the nun, or the nun that is to be——"

"Or is not," interrupted Angelica.

"Or, as you say, that is not—comes, ostensibly, not to Court, but on a private visit—note that she will be privately received. She comes . . . to copy manuscript in the library for the convent she is, or is not, to enter."

The maids of honour laughed, and then the one of the pretty mouth remarked, with a sigh, "Surely our Duke is a genius in matters con-

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cerning the heart. He is a villain, yet I love him well!"

"And I," said the second.

"And apparently the Lady Pilar," severely remarked the prim one; whereupon the Lady Geraldine emphatically said, "Nonsense!" which made the young ladies prick up their ears again.

"She is in love with the Count Everard Val Dernement, and he is coming to Court," she explained gravely.

"He is?" they gasped in concert.

"This is delightful," remarked Angelica. "I warrant the Duke will win. He'll kill, he'll surely kill that very handsome young man; but we'll have some fun first. How did he meet the nun?"

"They say he saw her at Mass, and purposely obtained an interview with her guardian, that detestable Abbé, that he might get another glimpse of her. The Abbé suspected nothing, and they met, it seems, I don't know how many times, in the old orchard of the villa. They aver she denied him and fled away."

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"Apparently into the arms of the Duke."

"Angelica, you shock me."

"I'm dreadfully shocked myself. Surely it's a novel notion—a nun at Court, forsooth, and—and a lover!"

"You see, they say her cousin had a will to shut her up at once, and though she would not wed, she would not take the veil either in too great haste. Hush! here comes the Duchess."

When the young Duchess entered the gallery, she noticed that the heads of her ladies-in-waiting were close, and their cheeks dimpled with suppressed laughter. She leant over the balustrade and peered down into the great hall below, with the intent look of one seeking any interruption from her own tired thoughts. No one passed, however, so she turned again and strolled round to where the girls were hobnobbing over their needles. She wore a peacock-blue gown embroidered in silver, and a purple scarf of gauze that twisted about her person like a luminous snake. She was small and dainty, and possessed a fair little

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countenance of a childish prettiness, distinguished, however, by a certain plaintive expression peculiarly attractive. She moved easily, but very slowly, hesitating now and then, almost as though to advance were not quite a safe progress.

"And what is the latest scandal, Lady Geraldine?" she asked, with a faint smile.

"We are doleful for the lack of it, my lady," answered the pretty Geraldine.

"A dimpled dolefulness I am inclined to envy!" returned the Duchess. "You were surely retailing the last for want of better; I am not certain I have heard even that. Tell me!"

"Oh! we were wickedly anticipating the scandal of to-morrow," murmured Angelica, with the demurest look of contrition on her funny little face.

"Concerning the Lady Pilar, I suppose! . . . She is beautiful—a saint, they say. What have you settled for the poor lady's undoing?"

"We thought it strange that one dedicated

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to Holy Church should, during her visit here, be cloistered where there were only men!" she murmured innocently.

"If the lady wishes to copy Greek manuscript, she must do it in the library, surely!" the young Duchess answered, with some indifference; yet her face had grown a little paler at the mention of their coming visitor's name, as if she divined well enough with whom they had coupled it.

"Ladies!" exclaimed Geraldine, "manly work requires manly company. We who can only sing and sew and dress our hair, must not display our jealousies, lest it be said that we have manly inclinations without either wit or ability for the matter. Alas! 'tis the fashion to be learned, and we are woefully out of the fashion. This nun hath stolen a march on us!" She glanced down at her own dainty feet, encased in the newest pointed slippers embroidered with pearls, and gave a little turn to her sleeve, which was of French design and the envy of her companions. The Lady Ger-

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aldine anticipated fashion as she anticipated scandal. This French sleeve was to be worn to the exclusion of any other in the coming months.

The little Duchess laughed as she watched her. "You will certainly have to take to your books, Lady Geraldine, or not even that sleeve will save you from dowdiness."

"I am not sure," answered she, "that gentlemen like this new craze of learning with women, 'tis hardly their province. Indeed, I heard my Lord of Carpoli declare that the spouting of Latin orations at public festivals by the Countess of Picca was a preposterously indecorous thing, and that we should soon be taking to doublets and hose and manly swaggerings, if we were not better kept within house."

"I should love to wear the dress of a man!" interrupted Angelica, "and for once be free from these trailing draperies which grow longer and longer every new fashion. They say the last time the Duchess of M—— visited the

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English court, she wore so many clothes that His Majesty declared he was not sure if the lady were present or only her robes. It is told she replied——."

"What?" said the three at once.

Angelica began to dimple.

"Well?" persisted they.

"She said, 'Your Majesty has but to command, and it shall be the reverse.'"

"And what *did* the King say?" they queried open-mouthed.

"He said"—she stooped a little forward and whispered; whereat they all looked at one another with an *oh!* in their eyes and a *no* on the tip of their tongues, and then laughed out loud so that the Duchess, who had leant again over the balustrade of the gallery and apparently forgotten their presence, turned and said,—

"Well, you know, was it not the Lady Dora who served as page for several years at the Court of Selmio? The Duke's wife was old and rich and jealous, and Dora was young and

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beautiful. He brought her to court as his page in doublet and hose, and the plain Duchess thought him a very delightful young man. . . . You might do likewise, Lady Angelica."

"I think I should be frightened at the ugly Duchess—ugly people are always hateful and cruel."

"She need be neither ugly nor hateful to possess a faithless lord."

A little silence fell upon the young women, and they rather consciously set to threading their needles and looking for new skeins of silk.

"I have heard that the Lady Pilar is really pious," said the Duchess, watching their discomfiture with a peculiar calmness that was disconcerting.

"Why, yes!" said Geraldine hurriedly. "They say she prays with such wanton eyes set upon the saints that knights beholding her have wished themselves the statue, that they might experience such a coming to life as her warm gaze would positively ensure."

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"She has lovers, then?"

"One, at any rate. The Count Everard Val Dernement. It is said that she loves him, too, yet dares not confess it. Her guardian, the Abbé, will not hear of the matter, and is for enclosing her at once. He is her cousin, and will inherit most of her estates, should she take the veil. Until she met this Count Everard Val Dernement, indeed from her childhood, she had warmed to a religious life."

"Well, her reputation has preceded her. It may be a lying forerunner."

"As to her piety?"

"No; I did not mean that. I meant all the things you have not said . . ." The Duchess moved away, heedless of the uncomfortable sensation she had created among her ladies, and slowly went down the great stairway. They were laughing again in a moment, and as she descended, she heard a light voice say, "And did the King really . . .?" and the Lady Geraldine answered, "Yes, of course he did . . ."

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On reaching the foot of the stairs, she crossed the hall towards the Duke's apartments as one possessed by an overpowering inclination to face her enemy—either peacefully or otherwise. She passed through the curtained archways, hesitating at each before gliding quickly across the apartment, ignoring the somewhat sleepy pages who were loitering about, and, at the last, clung for a moment to the heavy draperies before entering the Duke's immediate presence ; then, tossing her small head upwards, went through royally enough. She attained the middle of the room before the Duke observed her, and stood looking at him with eyes unwontedly bright.

He was seated at a reading-desk, in a great chair, and though his hands toyed with the page, his eyes wandered from the book and rested idly on the ground before him. He wore a white velvet square-cut tunic, white hose with green stripes, tan pointed shoes, and a massive gold chain about his neck. His face, as usual, was artificially whitened, and his lips

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extraordinarily scarlet ; the thick yellow hair, hanging perfectly straight on either side of the square, full, sensuous face, and cut short at the neck, was emphasized by a pleated black silk cap.

There was a certain grotesque beauty about the man, as he sat gravely before his book—a finished chiselling in the drawing of the high-bridged nose, the thick lips and sensitive brows, and in the heavily drooping eyelids that swept with a long curve, unafflicted by obvious lashes, over the pale, prominent eyes. She, at least, found him so, and her mind reverted now to the time when she had first thought him strangely hideous, and then gradually had grown to feel the overpowering attraction that led such women as she to worship him. It was rumoured that he had killed his first and second wife, and she had stuffed her pretty fingers in her ears that she might not hear it said. Later it had come that she had asked him if this were true, and he had looked at her oddly.

“What if it were so, if I respected their

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honour more than their life? Surely it is not so horrible to anticipate God's own intention for the sake of their good name. I assure you I sincerely mourned at their funerals." And she had crouched down at his feet in horror, trembling with fear and shame, whereat he had laughed, and kissed her, and assured her it was all untrue. She had believed him then. Now, those poisoned women seemed with her in this room, and she wondered if she could ever avenge them, or if she, too, must be honourably mourned.

"Ah!" he said, rising, and, bending over her hand, he raised it to his lips. He smiled with a gracious weariness that was in no way lost on the young Duchess. She did not attempt to return the greeting with the faintest expression of pleasure.

"I am not disturbing my lord?" said she.

"I should have liked to have been advised of your coming," he answered; "a pleasure anticipated is twice a pleasure."

"And if it be a pain, my lord?"

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"There can be no such if ; but if we must an if, why then the pain must be doublefold ! "

"Then, sir, you should compliment me on my charity." Her petulant mouth curved to a smile.

"Do you bring me ill news ? "

"Oh, no ! No ill news, my lord ! "

He understood her drift, and, with rather a cruel laugh, he said,—

"You are always delightful, but particularly so when you endeavour to be enigmatic ; your meaning becomes so wantonly obvious it is winning."

She sat down on a square seat that had no back or arms, with a little forlorn air, and leaning suddenly forward, she said,—

"Why do you not love me any more ? "

He looked up from his pages for a moment.
"I do."

She laughed. "My lord says 'I do.' Faith, it's only right that I should believe my lord ! " She rose again to her feet.

"I love you to-day," he repeated.

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"Ah! you might have added and to-morrow ; 'tis so soon here."

"How can I tell what you will be like to-morrow. You may be detestable."

"And the Lady Pilar may have come to-morrow ?"

"That is true ; and she is charming," he said.

"You will tire of her too, poor maid! Oh, faithless Cosmo!" she said whimsically, moving the while towards the door, "thou shouldst grow faithful soon from very weariness of being fickle."

"I am not fickle."

"No, my lord ?"

"I am foolishly constant."

"To whom is my lord constant—to his spriteliest hawk ?"

"No ; to the ideal of another winged creature that soars to infinite heights until it be caught."

"And when it is caught ?"

"It struts about like any other common fowl, and has no notion of the skies."

"Perhaps in catching it you wounded it—

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lowered its eyes to the earth, and broke its wing, so that it had no heart to look up."

Cosmo rose and walked slowly up and down. "Constant to my ideal," he repeated, ignoring her answer. "Is it my fault if you prove unfaithful to it? You are at first our queens—strange, unapproachable, winged divinities, with the secret of warm human love hidden in your eyes that maddens us to worship! Yet hardly is the nuptial bed warm, than you become the petty mistresses of our chattels, querulous housewives, or monstrously bedecked wantons of our courts, seeking admiration from every stripling page, and ogling every comer with your newly-married eyes."

"And, if it please my lord, which of these two fallen birds do I resemble?"

"Neither."

"I am honoured."

"There is a third kind considerably more trying."

"My lord would always find a new kind to fit the last lady he had wearied of."

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"Possibly. Woman's capacity for original shortcomings is infinite."

"And my special one?"

"The habit of digging out our faults with the tip of thy pretty tongue, and showering them upon our heads between our very kisses. We made a goddess of thee, and aspire to be a god in thy honour; and thou strip'st us naked to our own shame, till we can but claim to be the men we are, and forego the divinity we might have been."

"You will have ample occasion for the returning to that high state during the Lady Pilar's visit, my lord, for they say she is nearly divine already—a saint, at least—dedicated to Holy Church. Your reassumption will be a pleasure that will have made the stepping down worth while. You are still my debtor, you see."

"Always your debtor."

"I might have refused to receive your new—what shall we call her?"

"Certainly," he answered, with a faint shrug

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of his heavy shoulders, and an amused smile. She watched him for a moment in silence, then said sadly,—

“No, you would have had your way all the same; but are you not afraid that I might, supposing I were jealous, do her some injury, or make it possible for others to do so?”

“Not in the least!”

“Why?”

“You could have no reason.”

“No reason to kill my husband’s——”

“Hush! You are speaking of a *religious*. Such a calumny is sacrilege. Any violence to this lady would be monstrously unreasonable when——”

“When?”

“When you know that I love you.”

They stood in the middle of the room, facing one another. As he said this, she threw up her head and laughed—a strange, sad, hopeless little laugh.

“My lord is a finished liar,” said she.

“Ah!” he answered. “There! You see you will tell me my faults!”

CHAPTER II

THE young Duchess went to her toilette on the morrow with the feeling that only her utmost in personal adornment would give her any chance to rival—and not even that perhaps—the beautiful novice who was to arrive this day. Every woman of a certain attractiveness feels now and then that a perfect selection in dress may possibly assure an outshining of all her sisters, that the ideal gown would for once make her unrivalled. A delightful, illogical whim—proof of an instinctive sense in her that, after all, she was created to be a queen.

“Bring me,” said she to Lady Geraldine, “my gauze gown and the embroidered scapular. I have not worn them yet. Perhaps,” she continued, with a searching look at her companion, “I may not look ill in them.”

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The Lady Geraldine laughed with delight as she took out the robe of the silkiest texture that slipped through her fingers, and then unfolded the superbly embroidered sunset scapular or tunic, which was cut square at the neck in the new way.

"A fig for the nun and her sable robes, if you wear this, my lady!" said she. "How much it must have cost!"

"'Twas a wedding gift from the King of M——," said Gwelma. "Come, do you not think my hair put loosely in a golden net—see; and these two jewels on either side just above the ear—so. What was my lord wearing this morning?"

"Only his black velvet tunic—the one embroidered so thickly—and the black hose that are woven with a silver thread, looking like a veritable skin armour. Sombre enough his attire to-day. One would not think he had any desire to please."

"Who knows, perhaps the cloister prejudices of a nun."

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The two women looked at one another for a moment.

"Why do we all care for him so much?" continued the Duchess without turning her eyes away.

"We? my lady!" laughed the maid of honour; but in her eyes, too, the question seemed to waver unanswered.

"Why, yes! He has, no doubt, looked with pleasure on your pretty face, Geraldine, and you have returned the look with a blush. I do not blame you. He fools us all, and fools me, his wife, most of all."

"No, no, my lady!"

"Yes, yes; and we love him, we women, and cheat ourselves into thinking we are his favoured ones. Or, worse still, know that we are not, and submit.—Submission! Ah! will the day ever dawn when women will be free; when we shall not submit; when there will be men who will love us for other reasons than for our pretty flesh; when we shall care that they should, and have the

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courage to deny the libertine?" She looked up again, and added, with a faint glimmer of a smile, "But we have not, and we do not always want to, do we?"

"Never, my lady!" and the eyes of the shameless Geraldine twinkled.

"Thou pale-faced wanton!" laughed the Duchess.

"Nay, my lady; 'tis but the ravages of chastity."

"You are incorrigible, Geraldine. I, at any rate, have aspirations—a beginning, isn't it?—that's why," she finished whimsically, "I am dressing myself up in my best gown."

"For my lord?"

"Oh, yes, for my lawful lord. I have no Launcelot to lead me astray yet. I am not sure 'twould not be a better straying to love some one wholly who wholly loved me, instead of this passionate pain of caring for a faithless lord. Sometimes I think that I do not care—that it is, after all, but some strange hate that cheats my senses into the

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thinking it is love." She turned her eyes to the window, and gradually there rose into them the look that will at times transfigure a woman's face—some momentary record of an emotion risen, perhaps, from an unconscious soul to meet the hardly conscious thought of that idealer love that might have been hers, that is her birthright, and that remains unattainable — the sweeter passion of a perfect union that should have none of the acrimony of disillusion. Then she rose from her seat, and slipped on, first, the underdress of gauzy material that covered her figure like beaten gold, melting on the hips into cascades of folds that tumbled over one another in circlets at her feet ; and then, the blazing scapular that only revealed glimpses of the softness beneath at neck and sleeves, and on either side from the waist downwards, and in the long, sweeping train. Her red hair was twisted into a golden net—wide cross-barred, and fastened above the ear on either side with an emerald jewel. She

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took a string of pearls, and clasped it about her throat, remembering that he had given it her on her wedding day, so short a time ago.

“Come, let us descend and show our fine feathers!” she exclaimed, pleased enough with her glittering robes, and childishly anticipating a beginning again of her love story with my lord. She would steal a march on this nun—a nun, forsooth! And the world would be a bright place once more. She would propose that they should go riding together that afternoon, when the nun should be at her devotions—through the woods as of old, and they would dismount in a green place and sit near the stream, and then, and then—— Surely this was a good omen, this premonition that things would go well—this rising joy that came up from her heart to her throat—that made her feel the blood tingling in her cheeks, and the sweetness of life for the nonce.

When she stepped out into the wide gallery she found the maids of honour awaiting her, and descended with them to the great hall

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below, which was scattered with visitors and members of the household. Their guest was to be received later privately by herself and the Duke. The young novice was not visiting the Court, but coming to stay at the Palace under the protection of the Duchess whilst she made some copies of certain ecclesiastical manuscripts in the famous library.

At the foot of the stairs the Duke was standing, attended by several gentlemen. He wore, as the Lady Geraldine had described, a black velvet tunic embroidered in black and silver, and hose woven with a silver thread, and the black full cap he usually affected. And Gwelma realized how becoming indeed this sombre dressing was, and that he had hardly donned it for her pleasure. He hastened to meet her, over graciously she thought, and noted the restless, absent look hovering in those usually cold eyes, and the bitter, stinging fact that he was quite unconscious of any unusual attractiveness in her own person. He hardly glanced at the new robes. Her heart

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sank, and the oppression of being over-dressed fell upon her spirit. She flashed a comprehensive glance on the assembled courtiers, and understood them that day with a certain tired sensitiveness. Their recurrent personalities seemed overwhelming. They were so persistently the same, and yet would carry themselves as if their individuality was still something new, and their social grimacings and stock phrases both born of the moment. Matteo Morelli, the Chamberlain, was as freshly obsequious before her husband as one only just beginning his long term of servile submission. She observed the Countess of Tezzia, as usual edging her way near them—the poor shrivelled little lady, who had a weakness for the Duke, boasted he had on one occasion pressed her hand, and who ogled him before he was even present. There was the good Torra di Tolpe in her train, Alexander Torra di Tolpe da Mentilomezia, possessed of the longest name and the smallest castle in the Duchy. (Such an excellent burgess he had

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been, this man with a mania for a higher status. He had done service, brave service too, for the Emperor, and now strutted at Court, the happy possessor of a long title and a miniature stronghold on a barren mountain of his own, good-naturedly elated and good-naturedly tolerated by an aristocracy who had none of the northern prejudices of class—feudal exclusiveness—of the innately vulgar notion that a gentleman must needs be certificated. Mind, good manners and wit went a long way with a people who were the most intellectual in Europe. This receiving of Torra di Tolpe and taking him for granted, absurd and delightful as he succeeded in being, was eminently significant of a characteristic refinement in them, more ingrained than acquired. Well, Torra di Tolpe was happy, at any rate, thought our saddened little Duchess, and that strange Greek creature too, Mionades, not far from him, who was reputed to know more than the Fathers of the Church, the ancient philosophers (whose weighty works he first had dared to

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criticise), and the most ardent students of the day combined. He could steal one's soul away, and measure the distance of the stars. He might have her soul now, if only he would, for the nonce, look less permeated with dangerous knowledge that never yet had done any harm. She caught his eye at the thought, and it seemed maliciously to defy her. She knew the expression was caused by an affliction of his short-sighted, queer eyes, which were not set evenly in his head. They said he had the evil eye. It was a way with the world to attribute power to those afflicted by nature with some unusual shortcomings, surely in compensation for their Maker's thrift. But she nevertheless was disconcerted, and toyed nervously with the necklace that fell almost to her waist. The string snapped, and the white pearls fell one by one on to the stone floor.

She laughed over the mishap, and, whilst those near were stooping to pick up the jewels, she looked up wearily, as a noise at the further end of the hall attracted her attention. A

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prisoner, by some inadvertency, was being conducted from the tribunal chamber, and, at the moment that she looked, his eyes were resting on her in open, wistful admiration—brown eyes, like those of a hound in pain, set in a pale humorous face, a smile curving the lips near which was a spot of wet blood. It seemed a long moment to her before he had passed. It was, in fact, hardly one. The hall had considerably filled up, as if these gaily dressed people deliberately wished to screen her from the sight of the unhappy prisoner ; for such a member of the ducal household 'twere better to ignore ; yet the vision of his pale face remained with her—pale, evidently, because the man had been tortured. What had he done ? Who was he ? She turned to the Duke, and, noticing that he was in conversation with the Chamberlain, after a moment's hesitation beckoned to a loitering page, and begged him to find out the name of the prisoner who had just passed from the tribunal chamber. Then the Duke joined her, and the two moved through

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the crowd, followed only by Matteo Morelli and the ladies-in-waiting. The page returned, and Gwelma learned that the name of the prisoner was Stevio Calmani.

A few moments later she was seated in a high canopied chair, or semi-throne, in her own private audience-chamber, surrounded by her maids of honour.

The doors were suddenly flung open, and the Lady Pilar Maruri was announced. Gwelma shot a look at the Duke, and noted the quick drawing in of his lips and the exaggerated drooping of his heavy lids, signs she at once recognised in him of suppressed emotion. Then she looked back at the door, as the most beautiful woman of her generation entered the room, and knelt to receive the greeting of herself and the Duke. A tall, wondrous creature in a flowing, purple gown of woollen material, otherwise unconventional. She crossed the room with a free, quick movement, and her strange, shining eyes, like pale stars under her dusky hair, sought the Duchess's with an intense grave look that

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seemed to caress whilst they asked permission that she might be tolerated; and Gwelma understood why they had been called wanton, for they were the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen. A sense of almost childish delight assailed her, as she realized the extraordinary charm of her guest. She turned to the Duke with pleasure in her eyes, and forgot, in her spontaneous admiration, any thought of rivalry. She greeted the lady with a pretty grace enough, bidding her at once to rise. Yet those who were watching felt that the kneeling figure was conferring the favour, in a kind of divine humility, a sweet loveliness, making the formal ceremony like a warm sacrament.

Then, with the young Duchess, the truth crept up slowly, like cold blood rising in her veins, forcing the warmer to her heart, where the iciness would penetrate at last. "Who could dare blame him for loving her?" . . . And she laughed, suddenly laughed at the thought of her own fine plumes, these shining garments, donned with such vain assurance, that were to have brought my lord back to her feet.

CHAPTER III

IT was hardly a nun they had among them. Indeed, she explained that she had not yet in any way joined the good sisters, though it was her intention to do so quite shortly now. She had been dedicated from her childhood to the Church. When she murmured "Church" the ladies about her looked down, for there was more than a nun-like reverence in her tone, and they, usually unappreciative of Mother Church, could not resist the contagion of this visitor's deep enthusiasm. It seemed something greater than piety, and yet something less—as if they themselves had all mistaken the whole matter, and that a religious life were a thing of delight and sweetness, rather than penance doing and abstinence, or, as so often, a lying and impure counterfeit of such—that the crown of thorns, voluntarily

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worn, blossomed into fragrant flowers. She set them all to religion with a joyful insistence they found they had little desire to withstand, and during her visit the ladies of the ducal household neglected their swains "most cruelly" (so these latter averred) betaking themselves to the reading of pious books whenever their company was most desired. A few declared against her—she was a heretic, a pagan, and a monstrously presumptuous young woman. Oddly enough mostly men, these: Mionades the astrologer, for instance, and the fat chaplain, who sniffed at a piety that taught nothing of submission to a director, the taking counsel of a manly superior, or indicated any holy fear of Divine wrath. His penitents, too, had lately adopted an undue haste at confession, and a habit of slipping away ere his wise homilies were well out of his mouth, or any of his personal questions satisfactorily answered. He had a notion she was doing priest with them as far as she dared. The Duke, on hearing these grumblings, was

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considerably amused. "Why, my good father," said he, "you let a minx of seventeen usurp your sacred prerogatives! I will see to it. They shall be restored. I will make her pretty Eminence doff the baretta if——"

"If?" queried the indignant prelate.

"If you can prove her a heretic. She shall be chastised—her white person shall be chastised." He looked from the priest musingly out of the window, across a garden laid out with rose bushes and laurels in alternate groups, and murmured to himself, "only with a branch of roses, you sweet saint, that has just a little thorn here and there to prick your dainty flesh into submission,—a branch of crimson roses!"

"A branch of crimson roses!" echoed his companion.

"Oh, the devil take you! We're not all priests, you know."

"She studies philosophy," went on the prelate, ignoring the interruption. "Philosophy leads the young astray."

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"'Tis the trade of a philosopher to lead us all astray," answered the Duke, "that we may avoid the wrong road."

"And isn't straying the wrong road?" the priest sneered, with a vast amount of satisfaction. For once he had routed the masterful Cosmo in argument.

"The stray paths," answered the Duke, "are between the right and the wrong roads! Where is our anti-pope at present? I would see to her unfrocking at once!"

"In the library, copying St. Augustin's Confessions!"

"You make yourself aware of her doings."

"Am I not at Court, my lord, for the purpose of watching over the souls of erring sinners?"

"But not of pretty saints. You should take better care of me, for instance, in your day's work. You allow my soul to get into dreadful disorder. In truth, I think I am in sore need of absolution. I shall hie me to the pretty nun since she has turned priest. Does she refuse male converts?"

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"They say she has not seen a gentleman since her stay, though, for all such nonsense, she is in truth no nun at all, and at times declares she may never be one. Her dressings up are most unconventional."

The priest pursed up his fat lips, and the Duke laughed again. He loved her dressings up. She and all the ladies of the court had come to mass in garments of pure white, their hair flowing, and wreaths of living flowers on their pretty heads.

"I forbade such absurdities," continued the priest, "and she sent me word that her sex were in the habit of adorning themselves for worldly kings; were they then to do less for the King of kings!"

"Dear woman!"

"Dear woman, my lord? And when I explained that the Divinity regarded not outward display, she answered, 'had I never seen the wild flowers growing?'"

"By the bye," interrupted the Duke, "the Count Val Dernement, who is to honour us

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with a visit—why do you suppose he is coming?”

“It is rumoured that he loves this absurd nun.”

“That’s a pity, since she is to enter a convent.”

“If I am not mistaken, the lady has a passion for the youth that will naturally enhance her determination to enter a religious house. ’Tis the way with women. But he will nevertheless ultimately deter her from taking the veil—the gentleman, at the right time, will carry her off.”

“Ah! we will see!” answered the Duke, “The gentleman, meanwhile, is under suspicion!”

“Indeed!” exclaimed the suddenly interested priest, “for what?”

The Duke looked at him for a moment, with something of contempt. “For murder,” he said coolly.

“And he dares to come to Court? And he is still free? A new policy, my lord?”

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“He will not leave my Court. Meanwhile, the lady being interested will be likely to prolong her visit. These dainty creatures, whom we can kill by the pressure of our fingers—these women, who seem so weak and helpless, can cheat us of their persons, escape from us, flutter like butterflies through the bars of a prison, when the strongest man is powerless—when a giant must succumb!”

Such was the stir that the coming of Pilar Maruri to Court had occasioned. And though her stay was a short one, and the ladies, on her departure, fell back into their old habits of life—were reconciled again to the pursuit of petty intrigues, and breaking of hearts, something remained with them of her spiritual influence; religion ceased to mean to them the false miracle-workings of dissolute friars on the one hand, and the State schemings of powerful Churchmen on the other, or the fanatical asceticism of the preaching reformers. She had revealed to them the dignity and divinity of a religion of beauty—had united, unconsciously

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(in that great age of revival), the naturalness of the purer pagan worship with the spiritual passion of the Christian idea. What later humanists failed to convey through scholarship, she successfully anticipated in an instinctive consciousness that permeated her personality, and through it convinced those who came in touch with her. She was herself the personification of the idea which in her absence became vague, but which nevertheless left a purer atmosphere about the religious thoughts of her temporary disciples.

During the first week of her visit, the Duke carefully refrained from entering the library at the hour she was habitually to be found there, with a tact purposely intended to allay the suspicions of Gwelma, put the young novice off her guard, and raise her interest in himself. This voluntary absence too, on his part, this self-denial, brought the longing for sight of her to a point of exquisite torture he delighted not a little in. Cosmo, of Bresali, was no gross libertine, only refinedly, artistically vicious, a

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man, moreover, possessed of a certain poetic appreciation of the seriousness of passion—the hallowedness of the approach to the infinitely sacred thing the world called love, and the divinity of the woman, for the time being, from whom the mysterious veil of virtue had not been torn. He had dreamed always of the goddess beneath. He had found always a woman, and had never ceased to tire of the one as he unceasingly longed for the other.

After his discussion with the good chaplain, Cosmo sought the fair culprit in the library, careful as he walked up the long room to speak to all the writers who were present, and coming as it were by accident at last to the desk of the Lady Pilar. She was deeply engrossed, her beautiful head bent over the manuscript she was illuminating with such delicate skill.

“Positively unconscious of my existence,” he pondered, and said aloud, with much gravity,—

“Your Eminence.”

She raised her eyes and smiled. Her look

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hovered over his face as if trying to read there his meaning, and indeed read it, for she answered suddenly,—

“My son.”

The situation seemed delightfully intimate and sweet. Her humorous appreciation of his mood was as refreshing as the buffeting of a spring breeze on a windless day, which rises from nowhere, and fills the atmosphere with the fragrance of a blossoming world.

He remained with her some time, and talked of the book she was copying. He admired the illuminating of gold and blue and green on the margins—drawn from her fancy. It was to be a gift to the convent she was shortly to enter. He spoke to her of this determination with gravity, and found her wistful on the subject ; the idea was sweeter than the fact—evidently one grown up with her from childhood. He carefully expressed admiration for her intention, whilst he insidiously criticised the ethical value of such renunciation. The Order was a strict one. Life hereafter was to be for ever con-

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templated at the expense of all consciousness of present existence. The desires of this world to be annihilated, regarded as base, to develop those for a future state, which were after all still desires. The rules enjoined continuous prayer, scourging of the body for the remission of other people's sins, the sleeping on a plank, and the saying of orisons during the hours of the night. Evidently sleep, the most pure of Nature's blessings, must be outraged too. Was not all this a refusal of the gift of life that an Almighty had given to his creatures—a throwing back into God's face (as it were), as unworthy, His scheme of creation?

She found in his words a reflection of a latent thought within herself, and shrank a little from the realization.

"We can only take the road that seems to us best," she answered; "the Church offers us one, you philosophers so many!" Her hands tightened on a crucifix on the desk. "If He meant this," she said, "we should not be afraid to follow."

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"It was not meant," said the Duke suddenly, with a passion that startled the young copyist. "The Crucifixion was the living symbol of the killing of the spirit by the unbeliever, the horrible consequence of denying God, of denying His work. You perpetuate the monstrosity in your self-crucifixions. It is the denying of the divinity within yourself, denying the purity of God's creation ; not scourging what is evil, but crucifying what is good. This worshipping of the spirit, this killing of the body, is the profanest doctrine ever promulgated, a presumptuous conceit, a monstrous judging of the Creator's handiwork !"

"My lord," she said, with a faint smile, "the crushing of the spiritual life within us is even more profane. The body passeth to dust, says my book here, the spirit is immortal. I have a weakness for the immortal."

"You refuse what is, for what may be !"

She looked up. "The present has so little meaning to me. I cannot live in this puny, throbbing agitation of petty existence, this

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paltry clamouring for what is, after all, a sand hill thrown up from the same soil that one is treading on below. Ah! it is a poor thing, this life you offer, my lord. And are you so happy in it?" She stooped forward with a sudden personal scrutiny, and held all his senses by the sweet warm look her eyes ever had, an unconscious loveliness that embraced and soothed, and seemed to the receiver to hold the delight of all life. The Duke would have said, What matter anything in the world but the look of your dear eyes? but he answered, "No, no, dear Eminence, I am miserably unhappy, teach me your gospel." He spoke with an almost boyish gaiety, and flung himself on a seat not very far from her. "And so you are happy. Oh! let us be happy," he murmured, with an attempt at gravity that was laden with overflowing, uncontrollable cheerfulness; such was the power of the very naughty young scribe's eyes.

The teaching of the gospel did not proceed,

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however, for interruption came in the person of Mionades, the astrologist, whose countenance bore evident signs of disapproval of any such light matter—at any rate in connection with the Duke, his master, and the scribbling interloper with the face of an angel.

CHAPTER IV

MIONADES disapproved, highly disapproved of the introduction to the library of this lady reputed learned. He despised her religious opinions as did the priest, if on slightly different grounds. The philosopher considered women and monks excellent worms in their places—the library was not their place. And the pretension of a nun to philosophic learning was an impertinence this good man could in no way reconcile with his sense of the fitness of things. Let them dabble in the Latin Fathers, and spell out Greek texts behind their conventual walls!—but fie upon their meddlings in philosophy or letters! He consequently ignored the fair scribe working near him, with the persistent scrutiny of one wishing to emphasize the fact. He would look at her as if she were not there. If she begged of him to reach her a work,

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point her pen, or some other service of the kind, he did her bidding in solemn silence, eyeing her the while. If she asked a question, having heard of his great learning, he answered her as if she were a child. But the ground once broken, they talked occasionally. He would snap a remark sometimes, a long while after she had put a question or made an observation. It was not flowing, this conversation. The lady was really absorbed in her work; the gentleman, we blush to assert, was busy nursing his resentment, and mentally arguing the way best to crush her presumption.

"'Tis the fashion just now," he blurted one day, after a long morning of silence, "for women to write Latin verse, forsooth! Allow me to say, madam, the verse is poor stuff."

"Your countrywomen had a weakness for a similar fashion," she retorted, "long enough ago!"

"Sappho! pshaw! I am tired of her name—a baggage, a baggage—if she weren't a boy all the time!"

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This ingenuous hypothesis was pronounced with an accompanying look that defied contradiction. "It is good enough for your swallowing," was unmistakably expressed. The young novice dared to laugh—a grave offence, and yet so winningly committed that the old philosopher found his blood warming at the sound. This treacherous revolting of the flesh against his proper judgment he rigorously crushed; precisely feminine to end a discussion with a laugh—laughing, indeed, in the sacred precincts of the library! He turned on his heel; but during the morning the pleasant echo of it remained in his hearing. On the morrow he was by her side again, crossly instructive, forbidding in every movement of a solemn expression, that she should give way to anything so indecorous as laughter; hankering, nevertheless, for the sound of it, watching slyly for the ripple that should start at the corner of that red mouth—the petals of a rose were not redder—and sweep over the face, tilting the lines upwards, and sinking in the wondrous

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depths of her eyes at last ; to be affronted when it came, yet carrying away the vision of it to keep him company during his morning's work.

With the coming of the Duke daily to the library—for after that first interview this happened—his disapproval increased. Admiration for the young Duchess as a right specimen of her sex, with the affection he had borne her from her childhood, fanned it into indignation. He grasped how matters stood, knew better than any the passions and weaknesses of his master—anticipated tragedy and determined to intervene. Meanwhile he enjoyed the nursing of his disapproval—the keeping it bottled up, to issue forth only in unexpected splutterings of satirical speech against her sex at intervals.

His mistress, whom he was secretly championing, had, after the reception of the Lady Pilar, held aloof from her society, instructed her ladies to entertain their guest in her place, and watched, in a pathetic solitariness, the influence of her rival over her own feminine devotees. With a woman's sagacity

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she understood at once her husband's acted indifference. She knew how much more it implied than an open attention to the beauty, and found herself regarding with some contempt the mind that could conceive so paltry a policy, and imagine that it could in any way deceive her.

The woman who has been once loved is peculiarly sensitive to the counterfeit of passion. And those signs, almost imperceptible to the ordinary observer, which she understands and recognises instinctively, betray the false lover when every outward appearance of circumstances and conduct would protect him. It is the inexpressible that reveals the truth, the absence, when the flesh may still be united, of so intangible a thing, almost, as an atmosphere—the ceasing of a spiritual unity—a unity that in all great passions must be a considerable ingredient. Woman feels this with a leaping consciousness that no proof of infidelity can augment.

The little Duchess felt suddenly alone. The

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Court had gone over, as it were, to the side of the Duke, in their unanimous admiration of this guest. They had swallowed their scandal-mongering tongues at one gulp. The novice, on acquaintance, proved irreproachable; and even Gwelma could not find it just to speak ill of her. The young Duchess built up edifices of imaginary faults against her, during wakeful nights, to assuage the pain of jealousy; but in the morning, or at sight of her, she kicked them over bravely enough, and mentally lashed herself for so contemptible a fault. She could have loved Pilar too. During this time her thoughts wandered to the prisoner she had accidentally seen on the day of their guest's arrival. She wondered if he were dead, or if, down there in the dark places of the palace, another soul suffered alone. A great desire came over her to penetrate those dungeons, and tell him that the loneliness of one in a crowd was even as desolate as his in solitude—that men and women were somehow all prisoners, and death, surely, the deliverer; so

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sadly had the little Duchess grown. She sat in the loggia and looked out across the hills, and envied the young peasants who were working there in the vineyards. She found herself wishing that she might go away and live among the hills, no longer a Duchess, but just a woman under the free skies ; and in the mental picture she formed, the pale prisoner seemed to steal in, hardly consciously put there by herself.

Meantime, whilst she was dreaming even so, he and his companions were brought before the secret tribunal of the palace, accused of treason, and sentenced to death. They were quite young men, ardent scholars steeped in Neoplatonism, and fired with dreams of overthrowing the tyrant, and laying the foundation of a new and great Republic. They had vowed, with no little solemnity, to rid Bresali of its vicious governor, at the risk of their lives if must be. It was ordained, however, that these hot-headed enthusiasts were to be surprised at conference in the night, and taken secretly to the palace, from which two at least

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of them never returned. That they might reveal the names of any confederates, they were at once put to torture. The unhappy young men had no confederates.

On the day of execution, the Duke encountered the prisoners crossing the east cloister—stunted arches that seemed to burrow out the lowest masonry of the palace in a gloomy fretwork—leading apparently nowhere, and overlooking only a dank court that was dug in the earth twenty feet below the terraced gardens above. In the recess of its furthest corner, however, a depressed archway, heavily grated, led to the great underground of the palace, from whence no sound could reach the world outside.

The young men, who had issued from the torture chamber (they had been daily tortured), hobbling after the guard—hurrying to death with a pathetic eagerness—at sight of the Duke drew up their aching limbs, and passed defiant even to the last.

Cosmo had just quitted the library, and the

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vision of Pilar Maruri—of the beautiful woman as well as of the young novice—was still in his mind, and as a violent accompaniment to it, came the thought of these men's intention against his life—of how narrowly he had escaped death at a time when life had grown so doubly sweet to him. Was his life ever to be at the mercy of these worms? Hardly did he rid the world of one, than others stole up wriggling, unnoticed, till they became serpents coiled on his path with uplifted heads that spat death—would they not succeed at last? The murderer seemed to lurk behind the eyes of all who surrounded him. No peace, no peace for the fear of death! And yet, was he not Duke of Bresali—were not the people his slaves—his word their law—his caprice their will—could he not kill and torture them at his good pleasure, and must he fear? And the consciousness that he did fear, feared overwhelmingly, intensified his animosity to a mania.

He had heard that they were scholars, and

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had stolen down to get a view of beings, who for this reason, fascinated his interest beyond control. He secretly longed to converse with them, even to throw off their chains and drag them up into the library to a learned and peaceful disquisition. Yet, at sight of them, the remembrance of their plot against his life leapt to his consciousness with an overwhelming possession. He experienced an active desire to be at their throats, to feel their blood with his hands, tear their flesh, and spit into their faces the venom against them that raged throughout his person with a presence that was physically painful—his very entrails seemed to rise in hatred, and anything he might do to them to be inadequate and paltry punishment.

Stevio Calmani was the last to pass; he hesitated on nearing the Duke, eyed him with a reflective impertinence, and then murmured a witty defiance in Greek—a quotation from a classic only recently brought from the East. The Duke pricked his ears. The intellectual man of him was again dominant. His blood

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cooled under the spontaneous mental effort to answer the thrust. His senses were tickled by the audacity of this man's wit: he found himself wondering at a mind that was so singularly under control between torture and death. Before he went on his way he threw an order to the guard to retain the prisoner. The first two looked back at their friend with an expression of pity, envying him nothing, and walked on to their death, hustled by the guards, who were anxious to have their part of the matter over at any rate.

An hour later Stevio was ushered into the Duke's private apartments, the knowledge burning in his heart that his companions were dead, and that, for some monstrous caprice of the tyrant, his own sentence of death was remitted until the morrow.

"'Tis your pleasure," said the Duke, when they were alone, "to be witty on your way to death. You have no fear, then?"

His heavy lids drooped till they were all but closed, and the scarlet lips perceptibly curved

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into something of a smile. Stevio was fascinated by the cruel face, and found himself staring at the strange straw-coloured hair, in contrast to the whitened face and black ducal cap with its band of jewels, as he might at some strange feathered bird. This painted creature, this exquisite, was the man he had plotted to rid the State of, and who, Providence, on the contrary, had decided, should rid the State of him, Stevio, and of all men who raised a hand against his iniquitous tyranny, or murmured against his profligate outrages.

"I should fear it less," he answered at last, "had I been more successful in my design."

"You would give your life then to succeed?" pursued the Duke.

"I would."

"You find it unfair that, having failed, you should still have to give your life?"

"A philosopher accepts the results of his own actions. The question of fairness is beyond our very poor understanding. An Almighty's justice."

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Cosmo looked at him passively, and then threw up his head with an imperious gesture, as of one bored by a paltry creature successfully annoying him, and remarked in slow deliberate speech, with apparently no animosity,—

“Decidedly you are a worm—you are entirely unconscious of the gift of life, the wondrous gift of life!” He paused, and then continued with sudden scorn, “You, who are too paltry a thing to realize its sacred value, the infinite delight in being, in breathing, the sweetness of living, the passionate pleasure of understanding; you, who plot and plan to destroy your betters with the amiable notion of setting this very crooked world straight with the bilious imaginings of your melancholy brain, dare to speak of an Almighty’s justice; you, who would sacrifice your life. Those who sacrifice their lives are not worthy of living—the sooner they are dead and rotten the better; the world and life are for us who value every precious moment we are given, every sweet

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pleasure that is strewn on our way, every wonderful thing that comes to our hand, and winning, living thought that breaks through the mystery of our ignorance and whispers the secrets of creation. Life, 'tis for those who are worthy to hold it—hold it at all risks against all assassins—through a stream of blood, if must be, and by ridding the world of such poisonous mal-contents as you. Pshaw! you gave your life for your cause. Poor fool, 'twas the arrogance of the worm against his creator!"

"My lord's reputation has not belied him," replied Stevio, with a whimsical hesitancy in his manner as he added, "he can seduce the fairest truth into the service of his basest principles and vilest inclinations. I can but congratulate my lord on his dexterity if not on his philosophy."

The men looked at one another for a moment.

"I have a vile inclination," said Cosmo, after a moment's pause, "to know you a little better. Supposing we postpone this exe-

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cution,"—he toyed with a chain about his person,—“shall we say until you have learnt the value of life?” he laughed. “I have an immense desire to spy into your mind, my ardent young philosopher, eh? To crawl over your brain as a fly might, and peer into every cell till I have had my fill. When your tongue shall wag with less amusement to myself; when you have learnt that there are pleasures at Court; when passion for a woman, one who may seem the fairest in all the world, wakes in your sluggish veins, and it seems sweet to live, then, my young friend, you shall taste the poison you distilled for another—the horror of death. When life has become infinitely dear, then you shall die, as your friends did this morning, by degrees. Do not hope to escape,” he added; “my prisoners never escape, though they may have the liberty of my palace, and no other fetters than their word of honour.”

As he finished speaking the Duchess entered the room, and on seeing the prisoner she stood still, a look of compassion rising to her eyes.

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Cosmo smiled. "Allow me to present to you the Count Stevio Calmani," he said, "who is honouring us with a visit to Court. He came by way of my prisons by some inadvertency."

Gwelma noticed the chains still about the prisoner, and on the impulse, with something of defiance in her action, she gave him her hand. "My lord is welcome," she said, and Stevio knelt and raised her fingers to his lips.

"Madam, I did not expect so gracious a reception," he murmured.

"Should we not compensate, sir, for the accident of the less gracious one," she returned.

And to the tired prisoner, to the young philosopher who had lived only in contemplation of unphilosophical enough schemes for the betterment of the State, she seemed like a beneficent angel, who stooped to pour balm into the wounds of his tortured soul.

In fact, 'twas the weary body of him that felt the warm touch of the woman-hand—the *consolatrix afflictorum*.

CHAPTER V

ON leaving the presence of the Duke, Stevio Calmani was conducted, by one of the gentlemen pages, to an apartment furnished in the most costly and luxurious fashion. He looked at the boy, a mannikin of very few years, and said with a laugh, "Are all the rooms in the palace as wonderful as these?" The page said "No," with much gravity. They were the state rooms, "hardly ever used but when persons of——" and then he stammered, and looked confused.

"Of great importance visit the Duke, you were going to say. Well, I am evidently a person of importance."

The boy glanced up doubtfully. Stevio realized that his clothes had made a bad impression. "Ah!" he said, with a smile, "how do you know that I am not a king in disguise?"

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The little fellow seemed to think that this might be, and became suddenly grave. Stevio dismissed him on the better impression, and threw himself on the wide bed, around which hung costly damasks, embroidered with the arms of the house. Certainly a king could not wish for handsomer bed curtains. A few hours earlier he had been on his way to death ; now he might sleep, and forget, for a time at any rate ; and with time surely hope came hand in hand. He closed his eyes. Would he see the young Duchess then—she, who had looked, in her golden robes, like a wisp of corn tipped red by a setting sun ; yet whose soul had seemed revealed to him in one chance look, shadowy and sad as a clouded day in spring-time ; tortured, that soul, surely, as his body had been, by Cosmo of Bresali, Cosmo the cursed, Cosmo the philosopher, Cosmo who had given him his life, and with that, had he thought of it, this Cosmo, time, time, time . . . ?

Gradually things became confused in his

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own mind. Again he was on his way to death. He had just left the torture chamber; his limbs ached, and *she* seemed to be there looking with pity at him: then it was only the little page laughing and laughing. "Thou art not a king," said he, whilst a soft voice murmured, "Hush, hush, he is verily a king." It was Gwelma—she was near him again. The page laughed louder. How could a child laugh so? After all, it wasn't the page; it was the Duke laughing thus monstrously. Then the noise of it grew muffled; Gwelma faded from his sight, and the sound of gurgling water dinned in his ears. He was surely being borne through rushing torrents.

Two days elapsed before the prisoner was strong enough to leave his rooms, and present himself at Court. An extravagantly beautiful suit of clothes had been provided for him. He put them on, and descended to the great hall, on the evening of the third day, with much of the same feelings as those of the youth in the fairy tale, who found himself

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suddenly the honoured guest of an evil magician, in an enchanted palace.

He had often enough heard of the splendour and the gaiety and the luxuries of the Duke's Court, but nothing in his imagination could have presented the actual charm of the life led within the great Palace of Bresali. The suites of beautiful apartments, the halls, galleries, and great state rooms, peopled with men and women—women with sweet affectations, their person decked with gorgeous gowns and blazing jewels, their tongues ever ready with witty speech, whilst their eyes revealed the heart they persistently denied possession of—Philosophers, poets, painters. Exquisite dandies with curled locks and scented doublets. Adventurous nobles going and coming from the wars. Indolent pages, with the manner of bored men of the world before the observer—scoffing at all that was on earth and in heaven, yet frolicking scamps enough in secret, up to mischief, and to praying for saintly intercession when their affairs

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looked black. But perhaps more than all else, the great library stirred the soul of the young philosopher, with almost painful delight, bringing a longing for life, if only to remain for ever cloistered there, with the treasures of learning piled on either side of him in those shelves expressly built to hold the manuscripts and parchments and volumes of all the world's literature seemingly.

The Duke, too, was suave and charming whenever they met, signalling him out among the others at Court, to exchange an amusing word, or to discuss a point in question; but Stevio caught at times—even at those times when he found himself most fascinated by this strange man's personality—the look in his eyes of an animal watching the prey it has capriciously set at liberty, but which it is in all readiness to seize, with deadly intent, at the least sign of evasion. And gradually it was borne in upon him that Cosmo's revenge was awful indeed; for his young blood was ablaze at last—all the capacities

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of his being alive to do their work—the needs of the soul and body alike—the man of him and the god, leaping to their heritage—the divine energy of every attribute and sense.

Yet to partake in the pleasure about him were surely to signal his own death—this certain death that waited on his path wherever happiness tempted him, whenever the desire for life stirred in his veins—this dallying monster, more terrible than immediate death following on confinement and torture, and that comes, in fact, as a relief from suffering. The awakening in him of desires not to be gratified, of the yearning for the pleasure, warm about him, that he might not grasp—the passionate longing to live this wondrous life, only to find a death's head grinning between him and it, was a torture almost unbearable.

Still there were times when he forgot, and nature would rejoice in spite of all things, and then, some trivial accident—a word, a look—across the throng of courtiers—from the

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Duke—or perhaps the too great sweetness of some passing moment—would bring him to a rude awakening, and chill the warming blood in his veins.

On hearing of the presence of Val Derne-ment at Court, his old comrade, hope was momentarily fanned to a blaze. Surely Val had come to save him. For what other reason could he have crossed Cosmo's threshold? But, on their meeting—it happened before the Duke and several members of the household—he read a look of surprise, even of pain, in his friend's eyes, and the greeting passed coldly. Everard evidently knew nothing of his desperate plight, or, if he knew, he did not care: he seemed friendly, too, with the Duke—that was awful—had Everard turned traitor? What, otherwise, was he doing here? Had ambition grown up in his milksop heart at last, and taken so vile a form as this grovelling to their enemy? The youth's blood fired against his old friend. He would have smitten him there in the face,

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but that such a sneak were hardly worth the trouble. Instead, he turned his back on him, after a contemptuous glance, and Cosmo, who had watched them, smiled.

Not less did Val Dernement wonder at the presence of Calmani at Court, being wholly ignorant of his recent arrest. He mistook his insolent manner for an open protest against any renewing of the old relations between them. This fact of Calmani and himself being here at Bresali, speaking and smiling with Cosmo, the enemy of both their houses, the dread murderer, the oppressor of the people, the usurper of the Ducal throne, the painted monster, of whom, in their childhood, they had made waxen effigies in secret, and slowly burnt them—as an old witch had explained was the way to do should they be wilful to take revenge on their enemies—was surely some uncanny dream, some monstrous unreality that would vanish any moment and leave them honest men again. Yet the remembrance of Pilar—the grave wondrous

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girl who had looked down into his soul, and awakened life there, then stolen away affrighted at her doing, and stumbled here into the clutches of a profligate—dwarfed such fancied scruples to the poor pigmies they were.

Everard had found no difficulty in procuring an invitation to the Court of Bresali. The laurels he had won in the recent campaign under the Emperor were no insignificant recommendations, and Cosmo received the son of the man he had caused to be beheaded, on the merits of his personal valour. Honours were paid to the young soldier, and he received them with a proud reticence that was eminently in keeping with the grave figure whose unbending demeanour, even before the Duke, was spoken of and explained as merely a military affectation of the day.

At the meeting of these two men, a perceptible pause had taken place before any word was uttered. Cosmo, from under his drooping eyelids, looked intently on the

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superb young figure, traced the moulding of the beautiful features—suggestive of those heroic heads in marble of the ancient sculptures—up to the impassioned eyes, which he found lacked the gentle sweetness and the hovering light of enthusiasm which had been so conspicuous a peculiarity of the older Val Dernement, yet held instead, as it were, all the suffering those other eyes had so patiently looked upon, and a reflection of the tragedy that had closed them at last. In all else the young man was like enough his dead parent, and Cosmo understood that he too was his enemy, and one who might prove indomitable.

Everard discerned the challenge in this scrutiny, and knew that peace between them was an absurd pretence on either side. Yet later the charm of the Duke's personality stole unconsciously over him—as it did over every one who came in immediate contact with this remarkable potentate—that wonderful manner, the gracious attention he bestowed

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on any one claiming his attention, displaying an almost affectionate dignity that seemed to beg to be understood. "I am not so vile a person as they would have me," he all but said: "I am ever repenting me. Ah! you cannot forgive the execution of your father. I know, I know, and yet was I entirely to blame? Facts were misrepresented—the people growing riotous on his account," etc. He hardly spoke this in so many words, yet at different times he somehow let fall his meaning, and, if he did not get the expected response from the grave young soldier, he nevertheless knew he was gaining ground.

"Politics are monstrous things," he declared. "There should be no politics. What do you think, Calmani?"

"The world might be a holier place were politic knaves less numerous!" The sentence was hurled at Everard.

"And how do you define a politic knave?" asked the Duke.

"A creature who smiles on his enemy."

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"That were a Christian virtue."

"Or such an one who would outrage the womb that bore him by hobnobbing with the murderer of his parents!"

"Ah!" returned Cosmo smiling. He stepped between the two men. "I should define such a man as one who loved his neighbour better than himself. Am I not right, Val Derne-ment?"

"As you say, my lord," answered Everard, "he might love his neighbour better than himself, or his life, or his country."

CHAPTER VI

EVERARD failed to obtain an interview with Pilar. Made much of, himself, at Court, thrown suddenly into a world of gaiety wherein he found he was the centre of notice, and where it seemed he was not allowed any moments of solitude, and this, as if carefully pre-arranged by those in authority, he felt more distant, more incapable of reaching her than if she were a thousand miles away, instead of hidden only by the thickness of a wall, and kept from him by the etiquette and ceremonious tricks of Court life. The world was a laughing world here, dominated by stringent laws of impersonality and equivocation—a serious question was considered a dangerous speech, and answered either wittily to no purpose, or by a frank lie. Every one's affairs were his own, when not too provocative of amusing scandal, and any expected inter-

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ference, either to aid or prevent catastrophe, was good-naturedly shunned. The Duke's schemes, like intricate machinery, crossed the paths of every courtier, and were apt to trip up the unwary. The world, therefore, must needs be wary, and as outward wariness was an uncourtly attribute, it remained hidden under a cloak of cheerful indifference.

Everard was impressed by a sense of unreality about him that was vaguely charming, yet ominous. It all seemed a masque they perpetually enacted to keep the hearts of them from the graver facts passing around. These butterfly men and women at moments affected him as a mad, fantastic crowd barring him from Pilar, and out of their wanton, laughing eyes, suggesting some real danger beneath, which they had no intention of dwelling upon, but of which he might take heed if he would. This, of course, was only imaginary, but none the less affecting. Everard longed to break through the medley, insist upon gaining Pilar's apartments, and dragging her away. At these

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times the Duke invariably appeared at his elbow with a suave smile on his face, and a suggestion that they should witness together some sports or acting in the great court. He seemed to divine Everard's intentions by some extraordinary power. In truth he only divined them because the young man's face displayed but too plainly the emotions that passed within him. Val Dernement failed signally to be a courtier.

He saw her at last at Mass, the slim white figure kneeling in prayer. She never glanced his way, or seemed conscious that he was near. He watched her hungrily; and the tender inclining of the beautiful body, the warmth of her enwrapped attention, suggested a purity that indicated nothing of the ascetic, everything of the woman; and somehow, there, in her presence, he would take heart—understand the clinging to a vocation that had been all to her from her youth, and the shrinking from a love which had so actually taken possession of her, at least, for a brief hour. Everard did

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not doubt that she had loved him—her great tenderness on that evening had been convincing, because it had been stronger than herself—because it had frightened her, because she had stolen away on the morrow. The only fear he experienced—so instinctively does flesh answer flesh, and ignore protestings of the spirit—was that Cosmo might brutally have his way. This became a terror when pondered on. He had to recognise that he himself was powerless, and that so paltry an aid as patience was his only weapon. Surely Chance would intervene at last!

One day he met her in a corridor. She was accompanied by two ladies. For some moments her eyes rested upon him—frightened and appealing, with an involuntary caress that sped its way into renunciation before it was wholly born. An almost childish renunciation, which seemed to hold her from without. An unaccountable thing she must brave, as children will with indomitable courage when convinced without understanding. Then she was

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gone. He strode away, sick with anguish and bitterness, to one of the quieter courts, where he might be alone with the tumult of his nature. If she would not see him, if she herself put this barrier between them, surely all his efforts would be in vain.

A page, a slender dandy, reclining on a seat under an orange tree, saw the troubled look on the eminent young soldier's face, and after some moments of silent staring, pulled himself together and sauntered across the court to where Everard was pacing to and fro, imagining himself alone.

"At your service!" said the lad, with a nonchalant air.

"At my service!" answered Dernement angrily; "there is not a soul in the palace who would bestir his beautiful person to serve his Emperor!"

"I think not," replied the youth, undisturbed. "We do not trouble about the Emperor here, you know."

"Nor anything else!"

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"I will serve you if you will, my lord," he declared, with a very sweet smile. "You please me," he continued, mimicking the Duke's manner.

"That's something," answered Everard with a laugh. "How have I succeeded in working such a miracle?"

The page looked up at the sky for a moment. "You are not afraid of any one," he said.

"You mean of the Duke?"

"In faith, you are not afraid."

"You are mistaken—'tis the whole matter. I am terrified—terrified of the Duke!"

The boy looked disappointed, and then said with a sudden blush,—

"I do not believe you!"

"It is true. God, she is in his power, and I can only wait. Will no one help me to kill him?"

"Were my lord afraid he would not speak so openly."

"A logician, I perceive."

"No, only the ordinary kind of coward, my lord."

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"Ah! 'tis a pity such a comely youth should be a coward."

"Maybe that I am fond of my comeliness, and desire not to have it spoiled by the rack."

"Why offer your services, since you are afraid?"

"'Twas a whim—I have it still. My lord is comely and not a coward—'tis inspiriting."

"You impertinent youngster. Well, what will you do for me?"

"Anything. I should prefer some deed less violent than killing our lord Duke!" he laughed. "You see we could never succeed, and our pretty persons might——"

Everard looked at him with other thoughts in his mind. "Get me an interview with the Lady Pilar," he interrupted.

The boy hesitated. "Indeed, yes; at least, I will take a message. 'Twill be almost as dangerous as slaying Cosmo."

"Cease thy pleasantries, or I dare not trust thee. How wilt thou convey a message to her without being discovered?"

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"The lady writes alone at times in the library. Visitors are not admitted there; no one in fact but my lord Duke, some musty old writers, and——"

"Well!"

"Well, and any page with a message. If he should stumble on my lord Duke, my lord Duke will take the message; but if he could steal in when my lord Duke is not there ——"

"Boy, boy, boy—blessed boy, that shall be our way; but will she see me?" he murmured, more to himself than to the youth, yet looked at him for an answer, and getting none, strode up and down again.

They were interrupted by a bevy of young ladies coming out of chapel—a special service had been held in their honour, a very personal discourse from a preaching friar, hurled at all and each, as a fashionable sermon might be to-day, attacking their pretty clothes and their pet sins—such an one as set their senses glowing, and their emotions hastening towards the severest of reformations. With flushed

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cheeks and wet eyes, they made grave resolutions, which they remembered as far from the chapel as stood the pretty page, and the celebrated young soldier with the grave face, to whom they had all lost their hearts. They felt those flushed cheeks and shiny eyes were becoming, and forgot to pass with drooped eyelids. Once so far away, however, they were their merry selves again, and set to chattering as was their custom, like a bevy of birds in a summer garden. The pretty page was wafted off in their train. Everard followed, without much attention, some minutes later, and under the marble arches that faced the gardens, came upon Stevio Calmani, a solitary figure leaning against a column, with a weary look in his brown eyes. It was the first time they had met alone, and Everard found himself wondering what, after all, had come between them that they were no longer friends. Was not this absurd quarrel, too, part of the unreality about him? The consequence of some intentions other than their own.

CHAPTER VII

NOT least of Stevio Calmani's suffering was the daily sight of Val Dernement at Court. They never spoke. The hot-headed conspirator had summarily condemned his friend, and avoided him, or flung pointed speech at him, as circumstances controlled their meetings. That Everard took his jibes, his almost open insults in silence, that he did not seek an interview with him, or in any way explain his presence at Court, were surely proofs enough of his guilt. That his own violence prevented any other course of action did not occur to Stevio—or that Cosmo had determined to keep them apart. Yet under the surging waves of this indignation remained the deep affection he had ever borne his friend; and now that death was daily approaching at his heels as it were—the steps of every un-

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expected varlet signalling the dread summons—those hollow eyes peering out from every to-morrow, the bowels of him yearned for the old comradeship, the old intimacy, the sound of kindly notes in the well-known voice, the pressure of hands. He found himself thinking of those days at Dernement, when they had pored over their books together—solemn children they had been, quite sure that no joy of life was for them, yet bubbling over, for all that, at some joke of their own, some silly boyishness ; holding their sides with laughter, and ending at last in a veritable scuffle, rolling over ; an intertwining of arms and legs, hopelessly locked together whilst they still laughed ; then later, solemnly sitting over a book they could not understand, yet enjoyed more than if they did. Had they not carried their heads so much the higher before their companions because they had read such a work ? Were they not indeed serious young men, above mere boyish romplings, at any rate for the first ten minutes of play ? That they

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ultimately fell and romped right heartily, was regarded as a noble condescension on their part by those companions, and they had taken every care not to divulge the weakness within them, the itching to be at the sport. Yet, in thinking of it, they *had* been grave youths (Everard with the sad memory of his father's death peeping out of his eyes at unexpected moments), drawn together, even in those childish days, by mutual sorrows—sorrows they could hardly grasp the whole significance of, yet which they wore, as mourning cloaks, with a fitting gravity.

All such comradeship was over then. They were no longer friends; though what had they not vowed to assure the standing by one another through the long life before them—and now Everard would do nothing, nothing to save him. Death was at hand, and his friend turned a cold shoulder. Already he had seen in Cosmo's eyes the bored look of one weary of tormenting his prey. Daily now, hourly, the strain became more unbearable,

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and the sense of loneliness in the gay crowd of the Court an almost intolerable burden to bear.

He was watching to-day for the passing of the Duchess, leaning against a column under the arches of white marble, the view of stretching gardens between, and the distant hills, the blue and green and purple, like jewels in the white setting—a smiling world without ; within, mocking gaiety and brightness wherever his eye fell. The ladies passed, shot mischievous glances at him, and went their way, laughing and tossing their monstrous head-dresses, and waving their veils that fell almost to the ground, yet hid nothing of their rosy cheeks, or shining hair plaited and twirled and tortured in wondrous shapes, nor their figures—the tight gown strained across bust and stomach to show they were prettily made withal, and lacked not roundness nor womanly curves—the folds of these same gowns from hips to feet exaggerated in fulness that they should not be accused of immodesty, or was it the tyrant fashion? A

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bright, hovering medley of red and green and gold—black hems and white veils and different hued petticoats embroidered in silver, and falling over pointed slippers like iridescent waves about their feet. They passed, and the young Duchess was not with them. His heart fell. Were not these momentary interviews with *her* numbered now? Then Everard came by alone. He looked straight into Stevio's face and smiled, as if he had forgotten they were ill friends. He, too, with all the rest of the world, mocked at him. How dared he smile thus! A sudden passion swept through his being—indignation, revolt: the solitary human outraged by all nature—the dancing, gleaming sunlight without, and these warmed worms within, bedecked with the colours of the earth to hide their wormish origin—smiling, upright creatures, claiming heart and mind, yet void of them as the crawling creature that was so much the better than they, that 'twas *honest*—and made not silly noises of speech and laughter. The impotent soul of him rose against the universe. One

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solitary atom with a godly power to scorn

. . .

He poured out, in a deep aching voice, the venom he felt, the overwhelming indignation. Awful words he used of loathing and condemnation, that when they were out, floated back to him with the echo common to evil sounds, and a sudden shame lulled the storm—that, too, something of the infinite. What had he said? How had he struck at his friend?

Everard, white to the lips, moved to walk away, when Stevio, with trembling hands and shaking body, sank helplessly down on the stone seat, and stared at him with fixed eyes that seemed to be filling with tears. Then he bent his head to his hands, and his shoulders heaved as one who is weeping, and Everard sprang to his side, dismayed, and understanding at last. The sight of this man weeping was terrible.

“Stevio, old comrade, what ails thee?” he said gently, and laid his hand upon his shoulder

. . .

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There was a moment of hesitation : of shyness and shame between them. In Stevio an unaccountable instinct to resist the longed-for reconciliation, freezing his person to inaction, his emotions to coldness. What art thou to me? sprang to his lips; but the closer touch of Everard's hand on his shoulder checked the words; the poor body, for the nonce, rose up and conquered the evil inclinations of the soul . . .

The moment passed, and they were side by side—out of the cold thing, as creatures awakened from some horrid dream. Dernement learnt the awful sentence on his friend. "I thought you were here as I am, a guest," and Stevio forgot to ask why Everard was at Court. Everard nevertheless explained something of the reason of his presence at Bresali. "But tell me more of yourself—we must save you—we will save you."

"'Tis impossible, Val . . . and I have grown used to the thought of death . . . only" He looked away without finish-

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ing his sentence. Val Dernement divined his meaning and drew a little closer to him. "Forgive me, Stevio," he said.

"By all the devils, I believe I have," he answered in his old manner; "and I pray you do likewise, or I must needs go grovelling for the rest of my days, which are hardly numerous enough for the whole doing."

They sat and talked on, heedless of the long time they had been together; both were aware that such an opportunity might not recur. The Duke, once learning of their intimacy, would certainly take every means to prevent any intercourse between them, ordering the death of his prisoner, if needs be. Day drew in as they sat, the colour of it fading imperceptibly into the grey of night: only a pale streak of light in the skies above the hills indicating that the sun had set, and that darkness would soon cover up the world. Silence came to them in this deepening twilight, and each looked out between the columns, shadowy now, on to a silver world, and sought for the

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miraculous road that should lead them from the peril and misery of their present circumstances.

It had grown almost dark when Everard started up.

“Stevio! the river.”

Stevio turned his head.

“The river,” he repeated.

“It is unguarded.”

“Hush!” said Stevio. He trembled and looked hastily about, clinging to Everard’s arm.

“God, the river! But hush, hush! ’Tis swift and the shores precipitous, the water deep and awful; but it hastens—it hastens—could a boat bear with such haste? Hush!”

“Who is that?”

Stevio shrank back.

“Where?”

“Behind us.”

“Oh! ’tis only my shadow; in other words, my page.” He laughed as one reassured.

“He keeps a respectful distance, you observe, and is more often than not asleep.”

“Do not trust him,” said Everard. “Here

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comes Morelli, an inflated caterpillar, but venomous withal. I had better leave thee—I will see thee again.” Their hands tightened in a momentary grip beneath their cloaks ; then Everard hastened to meet the Chamberlain, conscious of an unmanly burning in his eyes and a rising in his throat. Had that been, perhaps, their last parting ?

CHAPTER VIII

THEY met again only before the Duke, or in the crowded reception rooms, often enough separated by the pretty persons of ladies and dandies, or corpulent nobles who held them prisoners either by their immovable persons or their wagging tongues. Messages, however, Everard successfully had conveyed to him. "Patience," or "I am at work"; or "Courage a little while longer," and Stevio took heart. How much he actually counted on the success of Val Dernement's plans he hardly set himself to realize. The world, at any rate, had become less an awful place since that reconciliation; and he would steal away to the great library and handle the precious volumes with Mionades or the library keepers, and for those moments forget his impending doom.

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It happened one day that he found himself in the inner library alone. A Greek refugee had been disposing of a precious volume to Mionades—a volume brought from the great city now held by the heathens : and when it was purchased, Mionades left it in his hands whilst he was busying himself with the stranger ; so that Stevio, finding himself alone, sat down in the embrasure of a window, and pored over the wondrous pages, with all the delight that a scholar experiences when a wholly new treasure of learning falls into his hands. All the world without was forgotten to him, as his eyes crept over the leaves, and dallied here and there at one phrase : a few magic words expressing an infinite thought that should bound on through all time, born again in a hundred tongues—to lead the way . . . Some of those little sets of words against which the gates of Hell shall not prevail. . . .

And the Duchess found him there. “You, too,” she said, “care so much for books?”

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He looked up. She was quite near, peering at him as if she wondered how it came that both this man and her husband should care for such things—they who were so different; a calm pain in her eyes—pain to which they had surely got used, and she was able to reflect on such a trivial matter as my lord's affection, and that of their guest, for things like books, trying to find in it some meaning that might be an excuse for the general ridiculousness of the world—at any rate an added example of the illogical state of human things.

“Not in the least,” he said passionately, and threw the volume aside; “it is nothing to me!”

At his ardour a flush spread over her face.

“My lord is not here?” she said, in explanation of her presence.

“You seek my lord?”

“It does not matter.”

“Will you not stay?”

She hesitated, as if a little surprised.

“I am still a prisoner who claims your kind indulgence,” he added eagerly.

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She started at the words. "A prisoner?" she repeated.

"My execution is only postponed." He laughed. "I did not fear death—I held life too lightly. How should a poor student, such as I was, dream of what life could mean?"

"There was a little pause between them. The kind compassion of her eyes burnt through his flesh, to the unmaning of him.

"It was decreed," he went on, "that I should be taught the sweetness thereof before the bitter of death were administered—lest I should not taste its acid. . . ."

"You must be jesting, sir."

"'Twould be a sorry jest, madam."

"You have been some time at Court, and you have never told me this?" she pleaded, as if her words might disprove the awful assertion.

"I thought it a paltry thing to go a grumbling." He laughed again. "But my grumbings pushed aside my thoughts, and would out——"

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"A prisoner—a prisoner?" she reiterated. "I cannot understand."

"A prisoner without chains, that is all—yet somehow more chained in your beautiful Court, where gaiety mocks at me and whispers through its laughter, 'Do not take part lest thou should'st signal thy death.'" He smiled up at her wistful face. "'Tis a little weary waiting, you know, and not—not—grumbling now and then to pass the time."

"'Tis very awful," she said. They were the only words she could find to say. Was not this but one more example of the cruelty of her lord. When they had loved one another, so long ago it seemed, she had shut her eyes to that in him. . . and now the daily awakening was ever pregnant with some new proof that her lord was pitiless to his enemies, the man she loved immeasurably, and she too was ranged among his enemies.

"Sir," she continued hurriedly, "I am sorry for you indeed—I will use my influence with

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the Duke. Once I could have promised your freedom. . . now I hardly dare . . .”

“Lady, I have no wish to live—only——”

“Only?”

“I would your good will.” The youth dropped his eyes, and in those words there rang all the despairing pain of youth that had dared to love his queen.

“Not desire to live?” she said gently.

“Do not tempt me, lest I might be weak and say what would best be left unsaid.”

“I will not press you if you do not wish it. I would give you my poor sympathy, which is all, even as the Duchess of Bresali, I have the power to do.”

“You speak sadly.”

She moved hurriedly from his side, going to a desk, at which the Lady Pilar habitually worked.

“No, no, I am not sad,” she repeated. “Wherefore should I be sad? See the Lady Pilar is illuminating a beautiful book—is it not wondrous work? You have not seen her?”

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Ah! you know we are all in love with her—My ladies here—every one turned religious and—and serious. I am the only one left who dare be gay.” The young Duchess laughed, and the tears crept through her lashes, and fell down her cheeks.

The youth’s whole being rose in revolt at sight of them. . . . What was death and torture to this?—to this shedding of tears by Gwelma?

CHAPTER IX

COSMO found them together, tears on her cheeks, and the passionate ardour of youth aflame on the face of the boy. And an unreasonable jealousy stole through his being, tickling a sense of humour in him against himself. "I do not love her, yet I am jealous," and in pondering on the thought the passion grew more alive, and a quiet rage began to throb in his veins. There was a woman then who dared to flaunt her lover before his eyes, there was a woman of whom he was weary, of whom he would be rid, who dared to make him jealous.

"Ah!" he said to Calmani, with a smile, "we have not had that promised discussion yet. The Count"—he turned to the Duchess—"is a great scholar, Gwelma, he knows as much even as our good Mionades here. Will you not show him the terrace, and he will tell you astonishing things of the stars?"

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"Will you come, sir?" said the Duchess after a moment's pause, and her face gleamed white like marble.

"That prospers," said the Duke maliciously, as he watched them go. "Ah! my fine friend, death were too good for you. Mionades, what is the penalty a faithless wife should pay?"

"The ancients averred that death . . ." answered the scholar indifferently; yet his fingers trembled as he turned a page of a folio at hand.

"And if a lady listens to the addresses of a lover who had contemplated taking her lord's life, what then?"

"A monstrous notion, my lord, treasonable indeed! But my lord hath no such suspicions?"

"Have you no eyes, Mionades?"

"My lord is surely, surely mistaken?"

"My lord is not mistaken!" answered the Duke, with sudden passion. "Go and look from the window. And be it so or not, it shall be so," he murmured to himself. "How she

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affronts me with her searching eyes and the accusing pallor of her cheeks. Am I growing a coward do you think, Mionades, that I am afraid—afraid to rid the world of a wanton ?”

Mionades lifted his head slowly and looked with his queer, crooked eyes at the Duke unflinchingly. “My lord is afraid,” he said, “not to rid the world of a wanton, but to thrust aside the wilted flower he is tired of. That other woman, that saint at Court, will none of my lord till he is rid of his wife, and perhaps not then willingly ; so my lord must of course be rid of his wife.”

“You are amusingly frank. Happily for you that sort of thing entertains me. ’Tis not my habit, sir, to make such an ado just for the thrusting of a wilted flower, as you prettily put it, from my path. You said, not a moment since, that death were the penalty of such a crime as hers. Look ye to it ; yours was the sentence, not mine.”

“She is innocent.”

“I have never known a woman who was not

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innocent . . . yet she has listened to the love-speeches of a knave. Did we not find her here but now? Has the Duke no honour, then, that he must let live a wanton wife?"

"Or that he should throw a hot-headed youth into daily intercourse with a pure woman who is neglected by her husband."

"'Tis my whim to try her."

"To destroy her."

"Mionades, you are prejudiced."

"And this nun meanwhile is receiving the addresses of her lover, Val Dernement."

"Decidedly, Mionades, you are prejudiced. The lady you mention is irreproachable—even I have failed."

"How long will you fail?"

"Not long, I hope."

"Poor Gwelma!"

"Do not mix things—Gwelma is faithless. I am jealous, but console myself. The matter is quite simple."

"Masterly—but a damnable lie."

"Mionades, if you were not a Greek and a

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scholar, and my excellent friend ; and if you had not those crooked eyes that make me mortally afraid of their doing me some evil, I would have your head for that word."

"Ah ! I would give it gladly enough could the giving straighten this crooked business !"

"Violence straightens nothing ; it necessitates a mess and a fuss, and we are afterwards just where we were before. My dear, white-livered Greek, do not be sentimental. That's my affair. As for this Dernement—well, I put his father's head on my ramparts, I shall string him up by the heels at my leisure. Meanwhile he has his uses."

The Duke walked away with a laugh, and Mionades set to his work with trembling hands and a cold heart. His mistress, such a child, and so dear to him, was in danger, and he was powerless—he, who would willingly give his old life to save her one little sigh ; he, the dried-up philosopher, who might not have a heart. What an absurd thing the world would find it—Mionades with a heart !

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As he worked, the Lady Pilar came into the library and moved to her desk hardly noticing his presence. He felt she was there before she had barely crossed the threshold, but he made no move to acknowledge her presence, and some considerable time passed before either spoke. The astronomer broke the silence. He looked up and drank in angrily the picture before him of the slender woman in the white clinging gown she had worn at Mass, the gown which so scandalized that dunder-headed chaplain. Her dusky hair was streaming over her shoulders, pressed on the crown by a golden circlet, the usual head-dress of a girl. A missal and a crucifix hung at her girdle. She had her back to the window, so that the light caught the outward edges of her figure like an aureole round her whole person, and Mionades became consumed with rage. What was this pretty saint doing here—preaching a new gospel of peace, or raising the evil, damnable passions of men to their own destruction, and to the sorrow of a pure, good

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woman who would suffer death at last that this saint should be enshrined as wife? Pestilence, not peace, she carried in her white hand; death, not life.

"Those heathens," said Mionades suddenly, "who have taken the most Christian of cities, deem that woman has no soul. I have been thinking of late," he glared, "that they must be right."

"I hope you will exempt me," she answered, with that wondrous smile that set the poor little philosopher tingling all over.

"Not at all," he said more violently still. "You were the example I drew my conclusion from."

"And I am so fond of my soul!"

"My God! that's it. You are so deeply concerned with yourself that you would walk over the bodies of women and children, and not know what you were doing. Ah! I do not blame you; your eyes are ever turned inward to yourself and the paltry god you have erected there; but, in the name of the great Almighty, open your eyes, young woman, and

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look about you, lest you trample on the innocent and lead your fellow-creatures to crime !”

“ The Count Everard would speak with you on the terrace, madam, if you would graciously grant him audience,” interrupted a page.

Pilar rose. The odd speech from Mionades had wounded her and dismayed her. She could not grasp his meaning, and thought it had some reference to Val Dernement, to his following her to Court, and his persistent entreaties to see her.

“ I will come,” she said.

Mionades rose, and as she passed him she said, “ You misjudge me.” Outside she hesitated, then moved forward to meet Everard Val Dernement.

* * * *

“ Pilar !” he said.

Her eyes dropped from his.

“ You grieve me,” she said, almost under her breath.

“ Why are you here ?”

She looked out across the wide terrace on

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to the smooth lawns where the rose trees bloomed in formal rows—late autumnal roses, their coloured blossoms crimson spots on the clustering foliage cut to formal shapes. The hastening wintry winds were coming even now to scatter wide their yielding petals ; but just now, for all the lateness of the year, 'twas summer-time. A peacock strolled on the sward, and other birds flew from in and out of the laurel bushes, or up to the blue so tenderly near the earth to-day ; and on the edge of a fountain basin sprawled two idle pages watching some monsters of the miniature deep. Pilar smiled, for the world seemed smiling.

“ I had to run away from a very provoking friend,” she said.

“ It pleases you to jest.”

“ I had wished so long to visit the Duke's famous library,” she went on hurriedly. “ He begged me to come. I thought you would not follow me to Court. I knew your house was hardly——”

“ Hardly friends with that of Bresali. And

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yet Pilar, I have crossed my enemy's threshold—I—I, of all men, have sought the Duke's hospitality that I might be near you."

The girl felt a sudden weakness numb her senses; she clutched the crucifix at her side and looked wistfully about as if trying to find a tangible excuse to interrupt this pent-up moment, or some support in actual things around against the vague pulsations of her being.

"Pilar, have you forgotten?"

"I wish to forget," she said. "I came away to forget. You tempted me into thinking of a life I had no right to dream of."

"And you came here?"

"You seem to reproach me for that?"

"What right have I to reproach you?"

"And yet you do. You must not reproach me. To come here was my only chance of escape. My guardian wished me to enter the Convent at once. I—I am not ready yet. I wanted this little respite. The Duke was my father's most intimate friend.

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He begged me to come, my guardian could not refuse." She paused. "You see, sir, I have taken sanctuary!" and she smiled.

"The Duke is a great scholar?" he said irrelevantly.

"Indeed, yes."

A look of despair was creeping over his face. "You have much in common," he said hesitatingly.

"He has helped me to some knowledge that may prove useful to me behind my convent walls, where, methinks, there is not over much learning."

"Pilar, will you never relent? Is your purpose so determined? Will you never be again as you were that day? You said you loved me then. What has happened to change . . .? You said it—you said it!"

"Hush, hush! it was a mad moment. I did not mean it."

"You meant it, Pilar!"

"The greater my sin. I have repented me; I pray you go. From childhood my life has

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been dedicated to Holy Church. If I forgot that for one brief day—if since there have been moments when I have been frightened of myself, I know that I have been tempted and that I shall resist.”

“I will wait,” he answered. “Good-bye.” Neither moved.

“Do not make it hard for me !” she said at last.

“Hard ! Ah ! my love, my love, surely—surely you shall love me at last.” He put out his hands.

“No, no, no, I pray you leave me. Good-bye.”

“So long as you are at Court I will wait. . . . Should you need me you will know that I am here. I understand that you care to be mistress of such a library ; . . . but Pilar, the Court of Bresali is not a fitting place for virtuous women. . . . Should you cease to retain the Duke’s friendship, he will be pitiless in his enmity. . . . Yet his friendship may prove the more dire thing . . . from that I cannot save you.”

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"What do you mean?" she said gently.

"Nothing, nothing. In truth, nothing, Pilar; the slanderous tongues of courtiers have filled me with unmanly suspicion. You will let me see you again?"

"'Twere unwise. Indeed, indeed, 'twould be even wrong. I must forget you as though I had never seen you, and—and"—the saddest smile in the world broke over her face—"methinks I find it difficult, for my lord doth steal one's thoughts when least one is aware. My lord is dangerous."

He saw the smile, but nothing of its sadness. "Lady, you are wanton in your cruelty; yet I did not think you would mock me. A saint, it seems, may do these things and there is no sin. God be with you!"

"Everard," she said, and then he was gone. She stood quite still, and, looking out across the sunny garden, she murmured, "Holy Virgin protect me from evil . . . and from mine own heart."

CHAPTER X

WHEN Pilar returned to her work she could do none of it. Mionades was no longer in the library. The long shadows were beginning to fall, and in her mind there still remained the vivid picture of the garden outside, with the sense of joy she experienced at being with him. This entirely dominated the pain of the parting which, do what she would, persisted in seeming unreal. She was determined it should be a fact, but the determination had no power to oust the living pleasure that throbbed still within her. She could afford to give way just a little to the warm happiness of thinking of him, since they were never to see one another again. He was at Court, of course, and they might accidentally meet before she left. She had not yet finished her work. She toyed with the leaves. How quiet the place seemed to-day!

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An atmosphere of almost ominous silence weighed about her. Why had Mionades been so angered?

She must still have another week to finish her copying, and then she would go. The thought seemed a cold one, and she wondered wistfully what had come to her.

She rose and walked slowly up and down. She could not think consecutively, she could hardly think at all, only of irrelevant things—a bright colour of a binding on the book shelves, or the shape of a shadow at her feet. She carried a pain and a joy in her heart, and it was all she could do to carry them. They could not bear thinking of, for neither were rightfully hers, neither were to be for her. What they were for the moment, was beyond her control; they were present, and the joy dominated the pain that affected her almost as a pretence.

Yet a presentiment of some coming evil seemed to be attacking her from without, her heart at moments felt actually to sink, as if a

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moral pit-fall had tripped her up unawares. It was nothing, of course, and she continued her walk with a notion that in a moment she would say her beads. Nevertheless, the sense of apprehension grew. As she turned each time at the end of the room, she found herself almost afraid to look, lest something unusual, even awful, should face her; and she started like a child when at last the Duke came in, rather silently, it is true, and then she laughed, for the spell was broken. He came quickly to her side, noting the colour in her cheeks, and, taking her hand reverently enough in his, led her to a long seat near the window.

"You have been working too hard," he said. The pressure of his hand was comforting after the strained hour of solitude, and she laughed again.

"I must finish soon, my lord," she said, "my convent calls me."

"I shall not let you go," he answered. "We want you here. Why should you go?"

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We are such deplorable sinners, what will become of us if you leave us?"

"My lord ever mocks me."

"I do not mock—only at a foolish resolution. You cannot, you must not, be a nun. It is quite absurd; you are the brightest, gayest creature that ever lived, and by some perverse accident, at which the very angels must feel disturbed, you have gotten this monstrous notion of turning nun." He paused for a moment. "You were going to teach me to be happy. Do you remember? Let us forget for a little while anything in the world but just happiness, you and I. Pilar, you foolish little nun, thou art not a nun but a sweet woman. Pilar, it is love and life that are God's gifts. He gave them to us."

He turned his eyes to the window reflectively.

"And made the world beautiful for lovers," he continued, "the flowers and the heavens, the running streams for lovers. The twilight, from crimson sunset to dark night, with just

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light enough in the spangled heavens that they may see one another's eyes, for lovers. The flush of dawn, for whom but for the waking lovers?" He turned his eyes back to her, and laughed very tenderly. "Pilar, wake!" he said.

She rose from her seat and moved to the desk where she had been writing. *The flush of dawn and crimson sunset for those who love*—the sentence repeated itself in her mind, and her eyes turned toward the garden.

"Pilar," he continued . . .

—And the convincing, beautiful voice fell on her ears as he paced up and down, hesitating now and then in a timid embarrassment before her, then continuing—the flow of chosen words falling spontaneously from his lips that trembled perceptibly, not for lack of language, but for the wakening uncertainty of his power to conquer.

In long after years the sound of this wonderful speech echoed in her ears, the speech spoken in impassioned pleading for her love,

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which instead had wakened consciousness within her of the great love she bore another.

“Love,” he said, “steals in upon us when least we dream of its presence : unasked, unexpected, even undesired, it insists upon an entry to our homes.” He paused and did not continue for several moments. “If we close our doors,” he went on, “if we thrust it out, it laughs in our face with the sad, winsome laugh of a beaten child who understands nothing of chastisement, and insists upon coming to the arms that are lifted against it. ‘I am in thy heart,’ says Love, ‘if thou would’st turn me out thou must go out too. . . .’ And if it might be wrong that love should come and you would kill it, bury your conscience knives deep in its heart, still it laughs and says, ‘Nay, thou must bury thy knife in thine own heart, for I am nestling there and can only die with thee.’” He stood still now, looking at her, and even then she did not divine what he had meant.

“I have striven not to love you, Pilar. I

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have purposely avoided your dear company, but Love is a god," he said gently, "and will no denial."

Pilar trembled, and clung to the desk whilst she tried to think of what had happened. He had spoken almost divinely, his words had torn her heart and burned into her brain. Her whole world had changed in those short moments; but their cruel significance—that was awful, cruel, wanton evil. Yet, if what he said were true, then it were not evil, but some monstrous accident, some cruel trick of Fate. Good and evil, good and evil. Ah! what were they then? If one love were infinite and of God, was not all love?—no; that seemed shameful, yet it could not be shameful.

"I do not know what you mean," she said at last. "Is this some new form of my lord's pleasantry?"

"God knows I am serious enough, Pilar."

"If you are serious, I can but beg permission to seek the Duchess."

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His eyes narrowed, and for an instant his fingers stretched outward, suggesting the movement of an animal. "Would you not rather seek the Count Val Dernement?" The tone was a sneer.

"I would trust his protection, my lord."

"Pilar, why do you love this man?"

"Love! love! what is love?"

His arms were round her.

"This, this, Pilar!"

"No," she answered, and her eyes looked fearlessly into his, and her strong, white hands pressed his shoulders on either side, so that his face could not advance to hers. "I know by the look of your eyes; they seem quite evil." She spoke slowly and indifferently, as if questioning herself why this man's love should not be love. Cosmo released her. She was wonderful, she was amazing, but he had not conquered; to conquer brutally was neither his way nor his desire. This white creature, whose soul seemed to look out from her eyes, warm and wondrous—wan-

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tonly, women said—who, when she was in his arms, resisted with no indignant modesty,—that vile pretence of virtue, was still unapproachable.

“I beg my lord to let me go,” she said. He walked away, and stood for some time with his back to her. The habit of Court etiquette prevented her from moving till he had given his assent. And somehow, too, a feeling that this interview was not over kept her wondering with a pained sense of expectancy.

It came, the awful thing, only too soon—that for which all the afternoon she had waited in fear, without knowing what it might be. He turned round, and his face seemed the most evil one she had ever seen.

“Do you not know,” he said, “that this Val Dernement is accused of murdering your father, under the most shameful conditions?”

He spoke quietly, as if controlling with an effort the indignation that would out. “You understand, he murdered your father.”

CHAPTER XI

EVERYTHING about her seemed to repeat this awful sentence. All the impressions of the day recurred to her with a violence. They had portended this ; they had held this in their hand ; but it was a lie, a foul, iniquitous lie, and this man had invented it for his purpose—or perhaps he had not, and such a murmur had reached him that he had believed, and yet that was not true. Why, then, had he not been arrested ? Her father had been the closest friend of Cosmo. How ?

“It is a cowardly and monstrous accusation,” she said at last.

“If I can prove it,” he answered.

“You cannot prove it, for it is not true.”

“Will you submit to a test ?”

“To any test.”

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"You know what the result will mean: If he is guilty, the murderer of your father must die."

"The murderer of my father shall die."

He looked at her and smiled, then walked carelessly from the room, and after a few minutes' absence returned. She had not moved from where he had left her.

"What harm has he done to you that you should bring this monstrous charge?"

"He has dared," he said with sudden passion, "to love you."

A page announced the Count Everard Val Dernement. The Duke bowed gravely, and then turned to the page with instructions that neither of the others heard. The boy retired, and the three were alone. The Duke moved to a table and sat down at it.

"Val Dernement," he said, "I have asked you here on a matter that is serious enough. I may say that it is at this lady's request. I beg your attention."

Two guards silently entered the room.

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"Some two years ago a certain Spanish gentleman of the name of Maruri was murdered. He was an old man—eighty, perhaps, and he was stabbed to death in the back. The murderer was sought by my agents throughout the province in vain. A rumour circulated at last as to who the murderer was."

The Duke paused.

"Well, my lord?"

"We thought you might enlighten us upon the matter. It would be a pity that an innocent person should be accused."

"My lord, I cannot help you."

"Ah!" said the Duke lightly, "I thought you might. You know the murdered man's daughter left her father's home on that night, returning to a convent. They say there was some quarrel. At any rate, no one saw Maruri alive after her departure."

"This can hardly concern me."

"No, only that the daughter has been accused."

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Everard gave a perceptible movement of discomfort. The idea that a woman should be accused of his crime was terrible. The shock of it unnerved him. Surely so hideous a miscarriage of truth could not happen! Both the Duke and Pilar observed the movement, and a sudden fear grew up in her heart.

"You see, this lady is the daughter of Maruri."

And then Pilar knew that this awful thing was true. His face had grown as white as death, and a look not of fear, but of horror, met her own questioning, imploring gaze. He seemed to shrink away from her, and forget the accusation of the Duke, in some overwhelming thought of her.

"You?" he said; the sound was hollow.

"Yes, Everard, I; did you not know?"

"My God! My God! I did not know his name!"

"Hired assassins are not told the names of those they have to murder," said the Duke.

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Everard turned to him.

"You think I am afraid—you think I am afraid to confess. No, no, for I killed him. It is not that that is horrible. It is that she should be the child of the wolf."

"Everard, say you did not do this thing."

"You, you, you!"

"Speak; only say it is not true."

"But it is true."

"You struck down an unarmed old man," interrupted Cosmo, "at the instigation of the Count Alberto Malragio, my honourable cousin whom the world dubs a pious man."

"I did not know his name either," said Everard absently. "Pilar," he paused, "why are you here? Answer me; why are you here to accuse me?"

"I have betrayed you, Everard; I have betrayed you," she murmured, not in answer to his question, but as if to convince herself of the awful thing she had unwittingly done. His guilt seemed nothing to her now that she realized the actual danger he was in.

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"You? You mean to the Duke? You and he!" The tortured man laughed.

"But it is all right," said Pilar hastily; "you did not do it, did you? You have some reason for saying this—some desire to shield a comrade?"

"I have said that I did this thing; you have heard the truth. What more do you want of me?"

"Val Dernement, you are my prisoner," said the Duke; and the two armed men approached him on either side.

"Everard, Everard!" cried Pilar desperately, "you are mad. Ah! speak; say something. Look, I have betrayed you; but I thought, I thought you were innocent. You are innocent; you have not understood. Why, it is absurd. You kill an old man? Listen! Can't you hear? Speak!"

"Take your prisoner," repeated the Duke.

"Oh, sir! I beg you one moment."

There was a terrible pause. The lovers looked at one another in despairing silence.

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The remembrance of all the past, the evening in the chapel on the heights, the days that followed, that other evening in the orchard, even the interview of so little while ago, held them looking into one another's eyes, as tortured creatures will, in awful yearning ; and then gradually in his, horror came back. He turned and went out in silence, followed by the guards.

When he had gone, she looked at the door, and then at the Duke, as one uncertain that what she had seen and heard had in truth happened.

"What have you done? What have I done? I cannot think. You are going to kill him. What has he done? I tell you it is absurd. He is innocent. Be reasonable."

"Do you not believe his word?"

"Ah! What can I think? You will not be cruel, will you? Of course you will not kill him. It is so long ago. He could not have known what he was doing. You say he killed my father. I can hardly remember my father ;

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he did not care for me. He was very old. It was dreadful to kill him, though. Why, why, why should he have killed him?"

"He was in the pay of Count Alberto, my cousin, a saintly man, who has aspirations to my Dukedom."

"Ah! Your cousin!" she repeated, and looked strangely at the Duke. "Well," she said, after a moment, "what if he did kill him?"

"Would you have me spare the murderer of your father?"

"'Tis awful, awful. He must die, of course. Ah! no, no, no, no; don't you understand, I love him, I love him."

"The murderer of your father?"

"Don't, don't repeat that. Say, quick, quick, you will not kill him. You see, you see, I have betrayed him. It would be horrible! He is your guest. Some punishment, of course. You will banish him."

"He must die."

"No, no; pity, ah, pity! I will do any-

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thing. I will give up my conventual life—yes! I will be to you what you will, only save him, save him. I will love you—indeed I will, I will.”

“You will sell yourself in exchange for an assassin’s life. Why speak of love?”

“Do not be angered,” she said gently; “I have said I will love you. If gratitude so infinite is not love, ’twere nigh akin.”

He laughed at her. “I would not let him live were the pains of hell to force my pity.”

She stood upright and stared at him, with wide-open eyes. The horror of the truth pressed on her mind with overwhelming insistence. Everard, then, was to die, and she would have caused his death. Cosmo would never relent. That awful white face, those red lips, how straight his hair fell—it was as yellow as straw—and his black doublet gleamed like steel. He would never, never relent. How he looked at her! They were almost white, his eyes, they were so pale, they seemed cruel things in themselves. They

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could darken, too, as smoke thickens till it is almost black. They had done that even this afternoon, when the heavy lids fell almost over them. Why should he relent? Yes, he was there before her, and nothing that she could do would make him relent. He wanted the death of his enemy, and Everard was his enemy.

Things began to grow faint before her eyes, to recede, and the air to grow thick and stifling. What was happening? Everard was to be killed, and she must save him; but she could not move, she could hardly see now, or think. Was she dying then—was this death? She tried to call out, but she was sure she made no sound. If she could only move. Something moved—yes, he was coming nearer—that was awful, for she would not be able to get away. She must get away, and save Everard somehow. He would never relent. She must not die yet. Would no one save her from this absurd death?—Jesu!

She swayed for a moment, then fell. Cosmo

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stooped down, and bent over the inanimate body gloatingly.

“He shall die, my pretty saint,” he said. Then, lifting her up in his arms, he called for help in a loud, strident voice.

CHAPTER XII

A GENERAL sense of indefinable oppression had fallen over the Court. It was the late autumn of the year, and the days began to draw in early. This was usually the season for certain quiet festivities at Bresali. The household, free of guests, was more *en famille* as it were, and the Duke less aloof, less a mighty person. Games were inaugurated in the great hall, at which the gentlemen would sport to the amusement of the Duchess and her maids of honour, seated under the great dais. When the Duchess withdrew, it is averred that the younger ladies would tuck up their trains and romp freely ; and it happened on occasions that some impish pages would set to extinguishing the lights ; and then a scurrying must needs take place, and a saving of who could and who would to their respective cham-

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bers. A rustling of silks, hasty footsteps, a tripping up of an unwilling lady, the sound of laughter, and the banging of doors ; and in the hush, the whispering of lovers who may have drawn to an alcove, holding their breath as the crowd brushed past them, that they might not be discovered.

The lovers were perhaps busy enough even now, but of romps and games there were none. The Duchess was confined to her room—ill, it was averred—and the Duke was hardly seen. The few passing visitors failed to obtain an audience, and a general gloom undoubtedly enveloped the palace.

“Nothing but the weather,” said a wise head, and those about who knew better, quickly assented, whilst those who knew nothing at all, and were therefore the more affected by an under-current of something amiss, hotly denied the assertion. Yet the weather was gloomy indeed, heavy clouds hanging in the skies, and bleak winds hastening from all points to oust the summer hardly

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yet gone. The corridors and outer halls, and some of the rooms were badly lit even when the sun streamed in, but in this overhung weather they were almost dark, which added to the sense of dreariness.

"I think the place should be lit up," said Lady Angelica. She had stumbled over a pretty youth, who, at the mishap, declared he was in fortune's way. She was coming from the chapel, a crucifix and missal at her girdle, as the Lady Pilar wore. "I feel that all kinds of awful things are occurring, and we cannot even see," she said; "the very atmosphere is steeped with mystery. What in the name of the Saints is happening?"

"Something dire indeed, since you have turned nun," he said.

"I am not a nun—but I must be in the fashion, and then I am really very unhappy at all the dreadful things I have done."

"Angelica, you never told me you had done dreadful things."

"Sir, it was not needful."

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"Angelica, be dreadful again—it becomes thee more than church-going!"

"Nay, 'tis too dark," she said, and flitted away from him to hear a rumour at the next meeting place that the Duke had been seen carrying the lifeless figure of the Lady Pilar in his arms from the library. "He looked like a damned soul bearing off a saint to hell—or even Satan himself, in something of a fright at the doing," said a young man.

"It's monstrously improper," said Angelica, and they laughed. The story was repeated, and with it the news that Everard Val Derne-ment had disappeared from Bresali.

These *courtlings* clustered together in little coloured knots in the dark corridors and halls, and discussed affairs. They were none the less gay for their serious demeanour. Such beings are not made to take part in grave matters. These "walking ladies and gentlemen" of the world ask only to be well dressed, well fed, well housed, and allowed to love where they will, giving a stedfast loyalty in

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return, and their delightful good humour and spirits, their effervescent wit, their pretty faces and graceful manners. The butterflies and flowers in the garden of life that take wing at the coming of seriousness and fade at disaster. Dear people, in truth, grown up, well-mannered children, loving scandal, that most excellent purger of society, and throwing it like a precious ball to one another, yet secreting the toy with delightful gravity at the approach of an outsider. They do not sin, because sin were a heavy business ; they are not saints, for that too were a serious undertaking. Nevertheless they are extremely good, if without any notion of morals, and quite beautiful because they never grieve. The sorrows of others push them to the expression of fine sentiments, from which they build a code of honour that is passed on to the world without, and swallowed whole by it. Some of the most beautiful and tender prejudices of life we owe to the courtling.

Undoubtedly at present the feathers of the

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courtlings were ruffled by the happening of events that they knew not the whole meaning of, and that in truth they would rather not—meddling beyond the mere humour of scandal was not their habit. Curiosity has ever been an exciting sense, and as such, they fed it every hour, with an immense amount of solemnity. One thing, however, disturbed them beyond these lighter emotions, the news, not yet substantiated, that Alberto, with an army, was not far off, and though he professed no enmity to his cousin, his proximity, under the circumstances, was disconcerting. Alberto was beloved by the people as he was disliked by themselves. He was a monument of Sanctity, an ascetic, a being who crushed out the joy of life, as he tore down the wondrous flowers that clung to an ancient wall, that he might build it up again, or gird it with iron props. He girded human souls with iron props—anticipating in this the later Reformers; and the soul of the courtier is a light thing that will slip through iron girdings with the

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best will in the world to do otherwise, and common souls slip not less surely, we have found, for all the Reformation.

Meanwhile two days had passed since Pilar had awakened from unconsciousness to the reality of a wholly new life within her heart and about her without. The visionary, the mystic, the hesitating girl, who found it incumbent to enter a religious house, even though she had loved in the world, because it had seemed that she had been called to do so, that her other senses were but temptations,—the desire to love and to be beloved, to drink of simple pleasure, to look at what was beautiful, to touch what was warm, and soft, and comforting,—mere obstructions in the way to the higher consciousness that was wholly spiritual, understood now that renunciation too was instigated by a yearning like any other, and not for higher things, but for some delight more satisfying, more engrossing, more entirely the giving of the whole nature to one desire that, because it could never be gratified, could never

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bring satiety; in other words, as Cosmo had put it, the refusing of the gift of life, the throwing it back into God's face, as it were, to grasp greedily at a better that had not been offered. Lord, I want not this wondrous thing Thou hast given me; I care not for this precious body, with its marvellous workings, which Thou hast created. The talents Thou hast bestowed on me are paltry concerns. Communion with my fellow-creatures is as ashes in my mouth. A poor thing this life! I will build a high wall round me, and of Thy countless beautiful gifts I will not one within. And I will lacerate my body with painful scourgings! The sweets fruits of Thy earth I will not eat. And man, a companion Thou didst offer to me, I will none of, so that, at last, Thou shalt yield to me something better than all these things, and having spat upon all Thy blessings, I ask that Thou shalt deign to bless me over and above all my fellow-creatures, and make me as a God. For as Lucifer, the very carrier of Thy light, rose in revolt, so do I;

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but Thou shalt be pleased with mine, and raise me higher than the kings of earth.

In this guise appeared now to Pilar that conventual meaning; and the knowledge had come to her through the pleadings of a cruel man. She had learnt, too, that in such an evil creature as Cosmo there lurked the Divine spirit, and in the wastes of his dark soul, the fair places that rest from the hand of his Maker.

But predominant over all this awakening of her nature was the vivid present consciousness that she must act, that she must put away dreaming, and use all her body's power, and her mind's ingenuity to save Everard. How, how was she to accomplish this thing? Cosmo relentless (she had seen him again), and Everard shortly to be executed! He was down there in the prison below the Palace.

Cosmo had once taken her there, in some devilish mood, to show her the tortuous underground, and hideous dungeons of Bresali. He had shown her, too, perhaps from that

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childish delight of the lover to share all with the being he loves—giving away the secrets of an Empire to see the light gleam brighter in his mistress's eyes—the secret passage that led out from the Palace to the woods beyond. He had shown her the special way these bolts drew back, and the golden key he wore on his person in the shape of a cross, set with jewels to deceive the world, and spoke of the other he kept in his bed-chamber.

“An ornament,” he said, smiling, “but a passport withal to freedom, were the Palace besieged.” Such is the weakness of man; and indeed, too, something of his strength, to care so trustingly for one who may not even care for him, and, like a child, not believe he could be betrayed. Not strong was Samson in that he conquered men, and won battles, but that for love's sake he could trust a woman. The ultimate disaster following such trust takes nothing from the glory of it. Consequences are the moves in the incomprehensible game of life—mean in themselves, they may be,

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for the game, greatly necessary, and they in no way affect the irradicable nobleness of a virtue they may have outraged. The seeming result of good is constantly evil, and we shudder, and say there is no good and no evil for they are inseparable; yet in truth they are quite separate, for the one is eternal, and the other the moving necessity of finite action. We must be betrayed, we must go hungry, we must suffer afflicting pains, and cruel wrongs, but trust, and patience, and self-sacrifice, kindness, love, honour, out-live *all* else; and hate, and cruelty, and treachery are but impotent passing things that we see in our neighbour, but for all time deny in ourselves. And surely the *Ego* is the only fact or which we dare with truth say, This is so; and which of us does not hate the evil within us, and know it to be not of us, but an enemy to whom we have given quarter, and whom we shall verily oust at last?

The remembrance of the jewelled key, and its duplicate, came to Pilar in a swift thought,

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and she knew that she must, and should, procure it. An extraordinary activity of mind came with the determination, and she faced the day, outwardly calm and silent, yet quickened within to the very pulsation of leaping energy : only her pale face was a little whiter, perhaps, and the grey lights of her eyes more wonderfully mysterious as they hovered momentarily under the sweeping lashes on a passing person. That white figure, in white flowing draperies, with the dusky hair shadowing them, and the flower-like face, gentle even now, for all the pained contraction of the tender lips, revealed nothing of the passionate determination that seemed to consume her person, whilst it steadied her footsteps and cleared her brain of all thoughts but the one.

Those pretty maids of honour, who had turned so childishly religious at her instigation, would await her in the tower room they had converted into a special chapel, as usual, and she must bear with them ; she must attend,

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too, the long services in the Church, and all the while she must be watching the moment's opportunity—seeking in the eyes of others a possible confederate, or even a dupe, if must be, to procure the key, or the means of obtaining it. Perhaps she must steal to his rooms alone, and search, and search with her heart, and mind, and body. She must bribe the varlets to silence, or smile at a page to gain an entry. And if Cosmo should come upon her? If, just as the precious thing were in her hand, she found the Duke watching with his cruel eyes?—that white face, and scarlet lips near hers again, and they were alone, they two there.—What then should she do? On this thought she would not ponder, but hastened to consider every other possible impediment, and circumvent it with all the cunning the mind could conceive.

Night came, however, and she had accomplished nothing. She heard that he, Everard, was to be tried before the secret tribunal. There was still time; but she realized, too,

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what that trial meant ; he would be forced to reveal the names of any others who had taken part in that plot, and if he did not, and she knew he would not, they would surely torture him, and she could not stay them, she could not stay their cruel hands.

CHAPTER XIII

FOR three days Gwelma had not left her apartments—if her heart must bleed it should bleed, then, in private. Up and down she paced, like a wild animal encaged, wringing her childish hands when the Lady Geraldine was not nigh, and shedding tears, that came singly at intervals and coursed over her cheeks, startling her to a renewed consciousness that there was in truth matter for weeping. Yet 'twere vile to weep for Cosmo. And what was worse than vile, and that froze her heart, and numbed her to her finger-tips, and caught her breath, so that to breathe again seemed some dire humiliation—'twere hopeless. These poor thawed tears that came so slowly were vain. *No hope* may be a worse thing than despair—it precedes despair, holding it in its hand, mirrored as it were—more calm

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because it is the act of realizing : the threshold hardly yet crossed.

Poor Gwelma held back : she would not cross, and closed her eyes, and actually her doors, so that the truth of it should not enter either her mind or her presence. Cosmo had done with her : yet in her heart she cried out, Cosmo, Cosmo, my beloved : and her flesh pricked and burned with pain and shame ; for the wedded woman outraged, shrinks as purely as a maid, and suffers even as she.

She lay on the edge of the bed, when she was not wearily walking up and down, and stared up at the golden canopy aloft, with wide, frightened eyes. The Lady Geraldine hardly left her, sitting by her side in her bright, fashionable gowns, like a hot-house flower daintily poised at her side, and given speech by some omnipotent fairy. She read verses to her, in a sweet sing-song voice, and told naughty stories, at which the young Duchess forgot to laugh, and with a blanched face and inexpressive look would murmur, "In truth,

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'tis funny," so that the bright eyes of Geraldine ceased to twinkle, and filled with tears from sympathy.

"'Love for thee—lite for thee, Gwendoline
I wait for thy coming by grasses green
With roses and myrtle to crown thee queen.

* * *

Rose petals do fall and myrtle will die,
Thy love will change as a changing sky.
Lived the Queen O!
The crown her woe,
And she died the Queen O! Crowned e'en so.'"

read the Lady Geraldine from her book of verses.

"Nay, enough," said the Duchess, "these writers of songs are perverse creatures, and have a notion that the best way to entertain is to make us weep. Is there nothing cheerful in the book?"

"I will look for something else."

"'Lived the Queen O!
The crown her woe,
And she died the Queen O! Crowned e'en so.'"

repeated the Duchess, as Lady Geraldine

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sought through the little volume for more cheerful matter.

"Here are some pretty lines," said she at last, for her thoughts had wandered from the book.

"Nay, nay, I have no mind to listen any more." She rose impatiently from the bed. "Geraldine, if only I *were* ill. See my little array of bottles to deceive the inquisitive. I was never so well."

"You are worse, my lady, than you dream."

Gwelma laughed. "Such dangerous remedies," she continued, touching a goblet of pink medicine ; "that is water coloured with rose leaves. I take it when my lord is nigh, and he says '*You are looking pale.*'"

"My lady *is* looking ill."

"May be, but I am not ill. Ah ! Is there no news at Court, Geraldine, hath my lover of scandal no news? 'Tis said of you that you anticipate scandal, as you do the fashion, and that poor culprits must needs follow your

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prophecies from sheer inability to think you could be wrong."

"Then they have but to thank me!" laughed Lady Geraldine.

"Ah! yes those; but the others, Geraldine.—those who are left?"

"I suppose they must do as best they can. Their turn has surely been or is to be."

"No, not always, Geraldine! Gwelma slipped to the edge of the bed, and leant her head, as a child might, to the shoulder of the pretty maid of honour, and looked wistfully up into her face. "I love thy gowns, Geraldine, but not thy scandal, for it breaks hearts sometimes. Geraldine, I am of these others. . . . Ah, me! Well, what news is there?"

"The young Count Everard has been arrested."

"Who?"

"Val Dernement. They have charged him with the murder of Maruri. He is to be executed at once."

The colour leapt into the young Duchess'

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cheeks, then fled as quickly as it had come. "Her lover. Do you understand? He has got rid of her lover. Poor youth! Ah! I cannot bear it. I shall go mad. Though I know he is unfaithful, though a thousand signs have told me so long before any outward circumstances proved it so, yet every new proof makes the pain as if 'twere a new pain, and stabs and stabs afresh. Poor youth!"

"Rest, my lady. You are looking ill indeed."

"I am ill in mind and heart, though 'tis quite enough to bear at once. Perhaps the poor healthy body will grow weary of such a doleful companion as my tired soul, and droop at last with it."

"'Tis a pity my lady should shut herself up."

"Would you have me show my jealous eyes to the crowd? Let the world see my broken heart, and hear them whispering, 'He cares for her no longer, the nun has come between. 'Twill not be long before we shall mourn the Duchess.' *Sincerely mourn*, those were his

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words. I should be honoured if he sincerely mourns me. And she? She will be the next poor fool to be loved and tossed aside."

"Nay, nay," said Geraldine, "'tis but a passing passion with the Duke for this Pilar. We all love her a little, the very varlets of the household, even my lady."

"Yes, I could have loved her. She is like a wonderful spirit. But oh! I hate, I hate her so. Geraldine, I have to shut myself up or ——"

"My lady?"

"I should kill her. It haunts me through the night. Sometimes I see her dead at my feet, and then, ah, then I am sorry. I call and call, but she lies quite still; and suddenly I wake to find that I am alone, and to remember that 'twill be I who will die. Geraldine, Geraldine, I am frightened of death!"

"My lady, rest a little; you will indeed be ill. Shall I not read to you again?"

"No, do not read; I cannot listen."

She lay back and closed her eyes.

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Then from without, a distant murmur rose on the air, of hundreds of voices clamouring.

"What was that?"

Geraldine went to the window, and leant out.

"There has been some rioting to-day in the town," she said; "some new tax has enraged the people, and the Count Alberto is in the city. The people love him."

The Duchess listened indifferently.

"They say the Count Alberto is a great and just man."

"And do they not say he ought to have been Duke of Bresali, but for some foul play?"

"God knows. It is likely. They are cousins, you know. A dull, austere, cold man, this Alberto. He may be saintly, but he is dull."

"Good men are dull," answered the naughty Geraldine, as shouts again rung out in the air.

"They will howl for days," said Gwelma, "like a pack of hungry wolves, poor wretches ;

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but at sight of the whip they crawl away to their lairs, and things go on the same."

"It will pass, then?"

"Oh, yes, it will pass. They are frightened when they see him. It always passes. He is awful!" She closed her eyes again, and Geraldine remained at the window.

"Geraldine," she said after some moments.

"Yes, my lady."

"It is the shame, the terrible shame."

"There is no shame."

"If I could get away. Sometimes I feel I must go to him and say, 'Cosmo, Cosmo, love her if you will, only love me too.' Ah! is there no shame in that—awful shame? and yet I may do it, oh, I may do it, unless I can get away. If you and I could only go to the hills, and live as the peasants do, and forget that we were ever at Court, forget that we ever knew Cosmo—Cosmo. Can we ever forget? Is there any forgetting? How tired I am. I may sleep—let me try and sleep." Her eyelids drooped.

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Geraldine watched by her side some time, then went quietly from the room.

And outside the window, which she had not long left, climbed a young figure up such protruding masonry as would give him a hold, on to the ledge of a loggia beneath, then up again, till he reached the narrow casement that opened into the Duchess's apartments.

* * * * *

Gwelma stirred, awakened from the light sleep that had closed her eyes after the long, tired day following on a sleepless night; and again a restless energy forced her to rise and walk about the room. Hardly was she on her feet, however, than she perceived Stevio Calmani standing near the window, with the look in his eyes of a pleading animal, who had involuntarily done wrong and waits chastisement. That look disarmed her of the natural indignation she felt at the audacity of such an entrance. She stared amazed and perturbed, realizing the awful danger the youth risked were the Duke to find him here, and thinking,

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too, of this intrepid ardour that dared face, a second time, the displeasure of Cosmo.

"Gwelma!"

"I do not understand. Why are you here?" she said. "How did you enter? Do you know that if the Duke should find you he will kill you?"

"He will kill me all the same."

"I know, I know; but where there is time there is hope. Oh, why were you so mad as to come here?"

"You would not see me."

"I thought it best not to."

He looked at her sadly.

"I had not hoped that you would care, though I had foolishly enough thought that perhaps you might."

"I do care, Stevio."

"Ah! Gwelma, Gwelma! come away from here. Come with me. Come away from this awful Court, this hideous life you are living, this dishonour that surrounds you, this monster who will kill you."

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"No, no, no, do not say that. You have no right to say that. Oh! How dare you say it!"

"This man who insults you before the world!"

"Hush, hush!"

"Gwelma, the city is rising against him; there is danger. I have planned our escape. The guards of the palace are panic-stricken; our flight will be easy. See, it grows dusk. Walk with me now from these rooms, none will observe us. Once we are on the terrace without, we are safe. Gwelma, won't you trust yourself with me? We will go to the hills and forget Bresali."

Still she stood looking at him. Why did this man love her so, and Cosmo—Cosmo—care so little? Why was the world such a crooked place? and why did she not tell him to go from her at once? He looked pale, and was beautiful, and good, and kind, and brave. But what was all that to her when she loved the painted potentate—this monster, who, as

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the youth declared, wanted her life? No, that was a cruel thing to say. He should not have said that, it was not true; he was only a little faithless to her for the moment. That would pass—that would surely pass.

“I should like to go to the hills. I should like to forget. But we cannot forget, Stevio. Do you love me very much—as he loves her?”

“With my life.”

“With your life; yes, that is how love is when it is love! And how long, how long will it last, this love you offer—till the fall of night, or perhaps till dawn to-morrow? and then — yet I believe you are true. I could have loved you if——”

“Gwelma!”

“No, but the matter is I do not love you. I love him, you know—is not that absurd?—though you are very, very dear to me. Now you must go.”

“No, if you will not come why should I go? I will stay and protect you from him.”

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"Your life is in danger."

"Well?"

"No, no, no, this is monstrous. You must go. Do you hear? I insist. Stevio, if you love me you would not wish to make me unhappy. Dear friend, you know how much I care for you. Ah! you will go, will you not? You rash, kind boy, save yourself. If there is danger to him, should I not be here? I am still his wife. Were you found in my chamber my honour——"

The word hung in his thoughts. She did not care, then? And he would only cause her dishonour. His own great love for her would dishonour her, and that lecherous profligate had a right to protect her from such as he.

"Lady, forgive me," he said, and he knelt down, and she touched the brown hair with her fingers.

"Good-bye," she said; "God bless you!" and there was the sound of tears in her voice.

Long and hungrily Stevio looked up into those dear eyes.

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"I shall not forget you," she said. "Why, what was that?"

"I hear nothing."

The sound, faint enough, of approaching footsteps fell upon their ears.

"Yes, yes, 'tis some one coming. My God! It is my husband!"

"Let him come."

"No, no; hide, quick, hide! There, where the curtain is, by the foot of the bed. I will feign sleep, then perhaps he will not tarry long. Oh! Stevio, Stevio!"

* * * * *

Cosmo came slowly into the room, quietly as one in a sick chamber, and paused before the great bed in which lay the pale-faced wife he had grown weary of. He looked more tenderly at her than he had for some time past; and as he fumbled in his doublet for a phial, he found himself thinking how tired she looked even in her sleep, and pale. She had quarrelled with life—poor Gwelma!—and thought she had only quarrelled with him. "When we

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quarrel with life there is no peace for us till death divorce us," he murmured to himself; "for she nags us, life, when we have quarrelled with her, worries and worries, strangely spiteful when once outraged, returning discontent for discontent, and piling ill luck on ill luck in wanton wilfulness. . . ."

And as he pondered, he poured poison from the phial into the cup of rose-coloured water at her side, and watched its yellow liquid mingle with the other, in little circles at first, then dipping down to infuse the whole with its dominant gold. He looked from it to her, imagining the crimson of her blood meeting this monster and succumbing to it, and the thought oppressed him. He stooped and kissed the face that already looked as one in death, and before he moved to go, put the cup a little nearer. Then he went away as he had come in—quietly, a little sadder, perhaps, something almost wistful in his expression as he stole out.

In the corridor that led from her apartments to the gallery he noticed a hound tied tightly

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to a post in a cruel fashion—some trick of an idle page to pass the hour ; and Cosmo untied it. “ Poor beast ! ” he said gently, and stroked the grateful animal as it licked his hand.

* * * * *

“ Why do you not go ? ” cried Gwelma. “ Why do you not go ? Haste, I beg of you. He may come back. Surely Fortune is with us. I pray you go, sir. You do not speak. What has happened ? God, God ! what has happened ? You affright me ! Do not gaze thus—what is it ? Ah ! speak—what is it ? ”

She looked up into his face and caught some awful meaning that stole into his eyes and out again, as if doubt and certainty were in scuffle there, and his lips dared not move to utter, and his tongue was cleaving to his mouth.

“ What is it ? ” she reiterated, shrinking with terror.

He took her hand roughly and dragged her towards the door.

“ Come,” he said.

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"I have told you I cannot come. Do you not understand?"

"I say you shall come!"

"What has happened?"

"Do not ask me to tell you the foul thing, but come."

"I will not."

He looked at her for a moment in dismay, then pointed hurriedly to the cup, as one who would have her understand the truth without realizing it, that he might get her from hence before the pain of the thought had fully grown. She looked at it and back to him, then laughed.

"It is not true," she said.

"He has poisoned it."

She staggered and thrust her hand before his mouth.

"No, no, no; do not say it."

"He has poisoned you. Come!"

"I will not come. It is not true, it is not true!"

"If you do not come I will drink it."

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“No.”

He took the cup and raised it to his lips.

She watched him ; as he tilted it she caught his hand suddenly. He lowered the cup ; her eyes stole slowly from his face to it, then horror leapt dominant into her frightened eyes.

“Stevio, the colour has changed !” she cried.

* * * * *

It had grown dark, and they stole out together, these two, so young both of them, hand in hand in frightened clinging, down the wide staircase, deserted at this hour, and dark. The ladies were at Vespers, the Duke surely hiding from the awful deed he had just committed, and in no hurry to approach the dread apartments. As they passed through the great hall, a light from an open door streamed across the stones, and the suave voice of Matteo Morelli, the chamberlain, talking with a clerk reached them, also the laughter of some pages from the distance. A varlet raised a curtain for them to pass. Gwelma looked into the servant's eyes.

“Good-bye, Giovanni,” she would have said ;

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"your mistress is going away for ever," but she dared not utter a word. They stole on silently, anticipating danger at every corner. Out at last on to the wide terrace, and thence down through the gardens. The trees and shrubs seemed immense in the darkness—living things, powerful and evil, evil gods at night who would surely stay her going if she did not hurry past.

They came to the swift river suddenly, on emerging from a shadowy grove. How swift it was, and black and gurgling.

"I am frightened," said Gwelma.

He took her hand.

"I am cold."

He wrapped closer the great cloak he had snatched up in her room, green, bright as an emerald, and edged with ermine that glistened white.

"The river is awful," she whispered.

He did not speak, but lifted her gently in his arms and carried her down some rude steps, and thence into a little craft that was tossing

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in the turbulent water like a live thing that would be free to go with the bubbling stream.

He cut the rope, and leapt in ; the boat shot forward on the black water. A white moon came out from the clouds. Gwelma looked back . . .

"I am frightened ; will the morning never come ; will the world never be light again ?" She stooped forward, and peered into his eyes.

"You are not afraid !"

His face was radiant, pale as ivory, yet whitely aglow, if such a thing could be, with the silent ecstasy of overwhelming happiness.

"The morning is coming," he said.

Then they were borne on swiftly to where the river ran narrow and deep, and the precipices rose high up on either side. The moon was hidden, and absolute darkness enveloped them.

"It is coming," he said.

"My feet are wet," she murmured.

"'Tis some drops of water at the bottom of the boat."

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"Yes, some water, I think."

"Rest them here."

Then for a brief while they were silent. The boat went less swiftly, the current was less strong, and the darkness was such that they could not see one another's face.

"Stevio, take me back!" she cried.

And the water deepened in the boat.

CHAPTER XIV

EVERARD, on leaving the presence of Pilar and the Duke, hastened before his escort, hardly conscious of the meaning of this arrest. His thoughts circled dizzily about a central idea, blurred and indistinct by their movement, a white flash of a thought which, if he could but perceive it clearly, would be overwhelmingly awful. This anarchy in his mind mercifully kept the soul of him still in doubt. . . . Something dire had happened—his going to prison was the least of it, a mere result that on the whole was more acceptable for the moment than liberty. He felt cold from head to foot, and longed for the tedious journey with these solemn men, through corridors and down winding steps, to end. Only when the door of his prison had closed, and he found himself actually alone in the dark cell

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did he awaken to the fact that he was in the hands of his enemy, shut in now between hideous walls that would face him till his death.

Pilar had betrayed him ; she was a wanton . . . and still he loved her immeasurably. An overwhelming craving to see that wondrous, treacherous face again tortured the man for long hours. He paced up and down, desire and despair raging in a ceaseless passion, till at last fatigue lulled his senses, and towards morning sleep intervened. Of his trial at the secret tribunal of the Court, and the cruel means that were taken to drag from him information against certain nobles of Bresali, in common speaking, to loosen his tongue against his friends, I hesitate to write. To us, with our highly developed nervous organization, such matters are inconceivable—we dare not face, even in thought, the suffering of a tortured human being. And to detail such, as it may have happened three hundred years ago, is to convey a most disproportionate idea of facts. We can only measure what that torture would

THE POTENTATE

be if inflicted upon ourselves, and the consideration is overwhelming. The idea, too, is ever greater than the fact—pain has a limit, we dare assert, and Nature, through unconsciousness, plays a kindly trick against her own shortcomings.

Val Dernement was undoubtedly carried back to his cell in a deplorable condition ; his lithe young figure helpless ; one of his arms actually crushed ; and the colour and animation surely gone from his face for ever. They had ousted the moral suffering by this bodily torture, and now the reaction from both caused a lethargy that kept him huddled in a corner, staring at the wall, with the only hope, not a very strong one, that death should come soon.

His thoughts wandered back to his childish days—to the father he had loved. That he himself had suffered because he had avenged such a parent was one faint consolation that visited him in these dark hours. He thought of the planned escape with Stevio in the little craft, and wondered if he had succeeded.

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Yesterday, 'twas Stevio waiting for death ; to-day 'twas *he*, and not so bravely as his comrade. Of Pilar he could not think. Only now and then her eyes seemed to peer at him reproachfully, the eyes of Pilar in the orchard, and he would try and smile a forgiveness, and momentarily, in this kindlier mood, a yearning would rise for one little view of her again, to fall as his mind travelled uncontrollably into vaguer dreams. He dosed at times, to wake with a start, a twinge of pain, perhaps, in the broken arm, or the noise of rats scurrying across the floor. He had no horror of these rats. There were not many, just a little family of homely creatures, who found the dark prison an excellent palace, and the new prisoner's food grub for kings. Who would not be such animals—tender-eyed when they are not afraid of human monsters—two-legged giant worms these men, who desired their blood for some unreasonable purpose, who attacked without provocation, and killed, not for prey, but for pleasure. Cowards, too, in war, setting traps,

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and covering their bodies with hard substance that a ratty tooth could not penetrate ; ridiculously elated at success, when with the aid of iron instruments, and shields, and yelping dogs, and traps, and poison bags, they had laid low an honest rat.

Everard found distraction in watching them. Turning that empty thing, his mind—that distorted, useless, unmanageable quantity that had lost hold, as it were, of human relations—to an impersonal sympathy with these lowly things.

The chaplain visited him to administer the Holy Sacrament of the Church. He must needs confess his sins before he faced his Maker. “Confess me! Ah! yes, I must confess me.” They went through the formulas. “I accuse myself, I accuse myself——” He hesitated. He was on his knees, the chaplain comfortably seated with an inclined head to get a close hearing. Mother rat distracted the prisoner’s attention, she was peering out from a hole to watch the ceremony. She

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must warn her young, if that fat intruder seated there were after setting traps. "I have forgotten God," said Everard. "I accuse myself of having forgotten God."

"Good, my son, proceed."

There was a long pause.

"I have forgotten God," he repeated.

"Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa."

"You have said it, my son," remarked the chaplain impatiently. "What else?"

"I can think of nothing else."

"My son!"

"My memory fails me."

"Come, come. We must have a better confession than this. Remind thyself that thou art on the eve of thy death; hell yawns at thy feet."

"I can think of nothing else. Ah! yes; I ate all my bread yesterday, and forgot Mother Rat."

"My son, thy thoughts wander; pray draw thy wits together. What further?"

"Nothing."

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"Fie, fie! Hast thou not committed murder?"

"Ah! yes; God has surely forgiven me that."

"And now . . . temptations of the flesh. Come, do not damn thy soul by hesitancy."

"I sought God in a woman's eyes."

"'Twas Satan, my son!"

"You lie! 'Twas God all the same."

"My son!"

"Ah! leave me alone, leave me alone! I will confess me anon."

Everard rose from his knees, and the chaplain hummed and hawed—begged him to return, to calm himself, and make a good confession. Everard, however, looked vacantly at him, till the good chaplain feared his penitent's mind was turned indeed, and grew afraid.

"You have suffered, doubtless, my son," he said in a conciliatory tone, "the rack is unpleasant; but the holy saints, you know, who had done no wrong, bore it with equanimity. And you have committed a grievous crime.

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. . . To take life is shocking! Your own is demanded in return, justly enough."

"Reverend Father, I thank you for your services. Now, with your permission, I would be alone."

"Certainly, my son, certainly. Our noble and illustrious Duke is a man of purpose, of iron will, but just. He scourges his enemies."

"And murders his friends!"

"I think it indelicate on your part to allude to murder."

Val Dernement laughed. "Good Father, you are astonishingly interesting, but at present I would dispense with your company."

"The er——," he coughed, and dropped his eyelids, then raised them and eyed his companion significantly. "The er——"

"Exactly," said Everard, with a grave bow of dismissal. "They will hang me, chaplain, to-morrow, I believe, at sunrise."

The priest was shocked at such coarse speaking, and put on a look of amazement at the information. "I will intercede for you to the

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Duke," he said, with the air of one promising some trivial favour casually alluded to. Then he turned, and walked with much dignity to the door.

"I pray you do."

"Oh, my son," he said, lifting a deprecating hand; "it will have no effect whatsoever."

"I did not dream it would, chaplain."

The priest ignored this rebuff, and with a well-mannered smile, he waved a farewell.

Alone again in his cell, Everard found that even the company of this fatuous prelate were an easier thing to bear than solitude during these last hours of his life. Why had he let him go? The creature would have talked till night had he but let him. He was human, at any rate! The rat was honest, but it was not human. He sat down again, and leant his head against the wall. The light was fading, and night coming quickly on his last day. He started—this then was his last day! He stared up at the little window through which a corner of light forced an entry. Greyer and

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greyer it grew as he watched. Silently the day slipped from his life. Unheeding darkness suddenly enshrouded the tender light of evening, and Everard was awfully alone. . .

One by one the hours went, each with a peculiar shape and face of its own, like actual things that hastened past him, carrying recollections and visions and unspoken murmurings. Shadowy essences with worlds to say, and nothing to tell. We are here—we are with you—we pass—something, nothing, everything, wandering echoes of immutable eternity.

He moved restlessly to escape from their oppression, and in flinging his body back, bruised the shattered arm, so that pain bit at him and lengthened out those hours with a grim intensity—long delirious Furies they became. Fever tossed at his brain, time and space and feeling became embodied, assailing creatures, laughing close to his face, vanishing, recurring, tormenting, awful.

“Enough, enough!” he cried from this delirium in his sleep when a warm hand

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closed over his own, a yellow light flashed, and the dear eyes of Pilar looked into his.

"God is kind," he said. "He hath sent thee to me in spirit, dear saint, for in truth, in body thou art a vile thing."

"Everard, 'tis no dream. It is I. Come, come, haste. I am here to set thee free. Ah! how they have hurt thee! Thy arm? God, God, what have they done?"

"'Twas Pilar, 'twas Pilar, not thou, sweet saint, but an awful thing like thee in the world, with thine eyes, but a wanton woman."

"Everard!"

"Nay, sweetheart, but thou art dear and good, my dream Pilar. I never doted on that other wench, 'twas thou all the while. God sent thee to me once in an orchard . . . 'twas thou, was't not? Not that other foul wench. . . . I found her at the Court of Cosmo, her paramour, and thought her thee . . . for she had thine eyes. . . . Thou art sure thou art not she? Why, if I thought 'twere so, I would break thy bones

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with my shattered arm. Nay, nay, but I love thee . . . come close, I am tired."

"Everard, awake, do not sleep now; awake, we shall be lost. Come, we must hasten, or we shall be found here."

He opened his eyes and looked at her; the delirium was passing. He shrank back.

"Who are you?"

He stared into her eyes. "God! 'tis Pilar!"

"Everard, I have come to set you free!"

He got up and walked away from her. "I do not care to accept favours from your lover!"

"My lover! What do you mean? Ah! but we need not waste words. I have procured the key of the door that opens into the secret passage, along the walls, to the woods. Once without, you will be safe. The household sleeps; the guards are occupied with the rioters."

"I have no wish to go."

"You will surely come if I beg you."

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"Ah! how dare you? . . . Woman, are you human, or some creature of another world, some emissary of Satan, that you come to tempt me with life, when you have robbed me of all that I held most sacred—all that *was* my life? . . . How have you procured my freedom, or are you betraying him too? Answer me."

"You affright me! Ah, come!"

"You offer me life. Why should I live when Pilar has fallen so low . . . but ah! my God! you are *his* child, the child of the wolf; how can you help it? He sold men before you for gold, gold, do you hear? innocent men for gold . . . and I killed him. . . . What else should you do but continue his work—betray the man who loved you, whom you professed to love. Your religious scruples deterred you. . . . Oh! I believed in your religion—a pretty mask to cover your intrigue with the profligate Cosmo. What did he ask of his mistress? What condition did he exact for my freedom?"

THE POTENTATE

"None. He does not know."

"So, to-day, you have the humour to betray him. . . . Yesterday it was I," he laughed grimly. "I am sorry I cannot help you to betray your lover."

"Suffering and torture have surely turned your mind, you cannot know what you are saying. At any rate, I cannot understand anything you have said. . . . I am not his . . . mistress. . . . I have not betrayed you. . . . I—I—I believed you innocent, and madly accepted any test he could invent to prove your guilt, so sure was I. . . . Can you blame me for that? . . . I understand that you should think I had betrayed you. It all looked so like it . . . but I did not, Everard, and you must believe me" She paused, then added quickly, with less emotion, "But even if you will not, that does not matter . . . only you have spoken of my father. You said he sold innocent men for gold. . . . What did you mean?"

THE POTENTATE

"That he was a traitor, and that he died the death of a traitor."

"You thought so, and that was why you killed him."

"That was why I killed him."

"Then you were not paid to—to—to——"

"Do you think all men and women can be bought?"

"Ah! The time is passing, Will you not come? I beg you to come. Things are not as you think. I did not betray you . . . and they told me—they told me you murdered my father at the instigation of the Count Alberto, for such rewards as he might offer. . . . Ah! Everard, even then all I thought of was how I could save you. . . . How can I make you understand? How can I tell you? He tricked me, even as he tricked you." She knelt down, and took his hand in hers and leant her head against his shoulder.

"He tricked you?"

"Aye, aye, tricked me; dear one, come."

"Do not do that. What have I been say-

THE POTENTATE

ing? Speak to me again. Thou would'st not lie to me—to a doomed man. Surely thou could'st not do that. He tricked thee, then? Let me try and think ; I loved you so. . . . God! they said vile things, but I did not believe them, till yesterday when I saw you with him. It came from your own lips. You said you had betrayed me. You had not then?"

"Unknowingly."

"Ah! I had not thought of that."

He stared at her in dismay.

"But you understand I killed your father, and we can be nothing to one another. Pilar, why do you weep? Do not weep. Listen, I was a little child, quite a little child. One holiday as I gambolled along the street I saw, high up on the ramparts of the city gate, the mutilated head of my father. Can you imagine it: the face was awful. I was frightened almost to madness, it haunted me day and night. And when my mother was dying—her heart broken—she whispered, 'Avenge

THE POTENTATE

thy father.' I was even then but a youth. Night after night in my dreams I did the thing ; day after day I awoke to realize it was still to be done. Then I would try to put it from me, reason against revenge, to understand at the finish of such arguments that cowardice was their instigation, weakness their advocate. Pilar, I had to do the thing—I had to do it."

"Forget, forget !"

"Nay, listen. I grew to manhood, tortured in mind, joyless, alone. On the day of my majority I heard that the traitor who had calumniated my father, was on the eve of betraying five youths, one of whom was my dearest friend, accusing them to the Duke of plotting against his life—hot-headed students they were, fired with dreams of laying the foundation of a great republic ; dear, harmless enthusiasts to be hanged as vile miscreants. I was led to his palace ; I did not even know his name, they thought it safer I should not. I stole into his room at night, and I saw him

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writing their names on a parchment. I can see it now—that parchment so beautifully written with fanciful strokes and flourishes—the parchment that was selling the bodies of men to their destruction. Ah! I remembered that head upon the ramparts, and I struck, I stabbed, and stabbed.”

Everard paused. His apology seemed a poor thing. He had killed her father and slandered her since, how could he think that she would even pity him.

“I shall pay the penalty to-morrow. I understand you cannot forgive me, but—I——”

She did not answer, but clung closer to him, and put her tear-stained face near his.

“Pilar, Pilar, my beloved. Oh! my beloved. Thy cheeks are wet, but thou dost laugh. . . . I had hungered for thy lips—dear lips. How warm thou art. Dost remember the apple blossoms and all the stars? . . .”

CHAPTER XV

IT happened in the secret passage, the awful thing ; Everard and Pilar had so far successfully evaded the vigilance of the guards. Only there, in the narrow corridor built actually in the walls, as they hastened through the darkness, were they stayed. A hand gripped Pilar's wrist. She did not hesitate, but sought the dagger from her belt. Her lover was helpless, chained, and crippled ; it must needs be his life or this stranger's. The woman of her hardly flinched. Nature within us at such moments of dire emergency has no sex. Pilar, the gentlest of women, struck down this assailant, felt the man fall at her feet, and waited in the silence and dark with parted lips, her fingers still gripping the dagger, to strike again if must be.

Were they alone ? She listened.

"Pilar!" said Everard, "what has happened?"

THE POTENTATE

"Hush!" she said. "Listen!"

A stifled groan reached them from the ground. Touched with compassion, she stooped down. There was not light enough to discern if he were a soldier or a member of the household, who had so fatally intercepted their passage.

"Who are you? Why did you stop me? Are you hurt? Speak, we must go. If you are one of the jailers, they will find you, and bring you help. Speak!"

"Pilar!"

"God! It is the Duke! My lord!"

"They have stormed the palace. They hold the east wing. They want my body to fling to the swine. If you have any pity, child, take me with you. . . . They will tear me to pieces, the rabble, the vile filthy rabble, curse them."

"Oh! why did you not speak!" said Pilar, overwhelmed with dismay.

"I could not see you, I thought I had been followed. I was escaping. Your footsteps

THE POTENTATE

paralysed my senses. Ah! child, you have hurt me."

"My lord!"

"Take me with you; do not leave me, Pilar; for pity's sake, take me with you."

"Yes, yes. Can you rise? Lean on my arm. Help me, Everard, he loses consciousness. With thy other hand, yes, so. . . . Ah! if it were only not dark. Is he dead? Do you think he is dead? No, no, we will get him to the air. 'Tis but a short distance, if I remember rightly."

The muffled roar of a hostile crowd penetrated the walls. . . . They stumbled on, bearing their enemy between them, until they came out at last into the wood. The light of dawn was springing on to the world, great crimson beams spanned the heavens, the earth still grey, and the trees shadowy things, their edges shimmering, fading mists about the trunks. They laid their burden on the ground some distance away.

"Ah! the mob," murmured Cosmo, "their

THE POTENTATE

faces were black." He raised himself on his elbow and looked at Dernement.

"You have your lover there ; I meant to hang him to-day. Pilar, come here, stoop down, what does it matter now I am your prisoner. . . . Stay with me. . . . I cannot die alone ! . . . 'Tis not so bad with thee nigh. . . . How brave thou art. Life is thy right . . . thou art magnificent. Great God ! how I love thee . . . "

Everard turned his head away. This dying man loved then, loved as he loved ; and a great pity quickened within him ; the coming light troubled his eyes, colour spreading over the earth, limiting space that in the greyness of early morning stretched away to throbbing infinity.

"How did you get there?" murmured Cosmo. "Your Eminence, your Eminence, you stole my key. Fie! your Eminence!"

The tears were pushing through her lashes and fell on her hands as she bound his wound with a piece of her gown. He watched her.

"It is useless, Eminence, you have struck

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too deep. . . . See the flush of dawn ;
'tis for the lovers, Pilar ; do not forget to love.
My cousin Alberto's in the city, up, I swear
with the rabble. The flush of dawn should
shock my pious cousin "

" Come closer Look, Dernement
has tears in his eyes ; he should want my blood,
eh ? Eminence ! "

" Yes, my lord. "

" Wilt kiss me, Eminence. "

Pilar stooped and kissed the dying Potentate.

" Blessed woman, thou art weeping. . . .
I cannot see. It grows dark. Do not leave
me. Pilar, where art thou ? Pilar thou hast
killed me, and now thou wouldst leave me.
No, no, do not leave me ! "

" My lord ! "

" Pilar, where art thou ? I am alone, alone ;
death is awful, death is coming, I cannot bear
it, and alone, alone. I am frightened, Pilar.
. . . . No, no ; not death, not death. " His
head fell back.

THE POTENTATE

"My lord, I am here."

The terror died from his eyes, the contorted muscles relaxed, the delirium passed, he looked up with a smile.

"Ah! Eminence, is that you?"

* * * * *

They covered up his body with her cloak. Both hesitated as they drew the folds near the face quite beautiful in death, serene and peaceful as the most saintly dead. Both felt an overwhelming sorrow. Cosmo the cruel, Cosmo the tyrant, Cosmo the profligate was dead ; but dead too was Cosmo the courtier, Cosmo the magnificent, Cosmo the philosopher.

The colour of day had settled about them, and the beginning and end of things were defined : the horizon, a protecting wall ; the heavens, a comforting canopy ; the great crimson, rising fire, a yellow lamp hung on high, showering earth with warm gold.

They stole out of the wood to the square before the Palace, where a mob was surging to and fro, hustling and shouting. The towns-

THE POTENTATE

men had been repulsed after all ; the east wing cleared by Mionades and the courtlings. Disappointment and rage was urging them to a fresh attack, when the steady tramp of soldiers, and the glistening of armour flashing suddenly from the rear, turned their attention, and Alberto the Great rode into their midst.

A shout went up from the people, " Alberto, viva Alberto ! Death to Cosmo ! "

He turned in his saddle towards the mob. Still his soldiers streamed in, not a company of men, but an army, stretching in a long line towards the hills. In a sudden silence, he lifted his hand and commanded, on their peril, submission to the reigning Duke—Cosmo of Bresali.

Everard recognised the stranger, the powerful face that had won him, two years ago, to an unhesitating fealty. So Alberto had not come with his great army against his cousin, but to quell the insurgents and support the throne. Somehow he was glad of that, Alberto was after all the Great . . .

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The wanderers stood, Everard still with chains about him, Pilar with stains of blood on her white gown, isolated just above the surging mob, and immediately in front of the great warrior astride his horse. The edge of the woods they had come through dipped precipitously from a terrace to the paved way beneath.

They were suddenly perceived, and all eyes were turned to them. The stranger smiled a recognition, reining his horse to a standstill. Everard knelt.

"The Duke is dead," he cried. "Long live the Duke!"

There was a great pause. Alberto uncovered. The news sped through the crowd: "The tyrant is dead." Every one looked at his neighbour to verify the words which flew down the ranks, till a great burst rose on the air from the townsmen and soldiers, from the insurgents and rabble,—

"Long live the Duke Alberto!"

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